Malignia

License Notice

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution–NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-ND 4.0).
You are free to share, copy, and redistribute this material in any medium or format, including for commercial purposes, provided that proper credit is given to the author.
No modifications, adaptations, or derivative works are permitted without explicit written permission from the author.

Chapter One

The Red Orphenatia

June 28th, 2064
Monday
The city of Mered, Arnea State, Eastern Europe

It had been widely known as the green medicine for the soul. That new flower, born accidentally right after the Third Big War somewhere in May 2044, appeared almost divinely. It shone like a drop of crystal rain, colored in different shades of green. There was a mystifying fog around it. The flower smelled like calmness, like fresh sourness and wet dusk. After the war, it was planted everywhere - in every yard, park, and along every shore - becoming more popular than any other flower. Its name was Orphenatia.

After the war, the wheels of the market and capitalism stopped turning, and a new idea was born. It was a whole new system known as sustainable economy or sustainable development. Created at the same time as the green flower, it grew together with it, building the New Order one step at a time. After hydrogen bombs took too many victims, something changed in the very soul of humankind. Collectively, it grew sick of greed. Deserted cities were reforested, and the air began to purify. New elites realized that they could - and must - control greed. And at once, every human trait that had been desirable before the war, such as competitiveness and the inhuman race for money, now became a hindrance to development and renewal. And maybe, for the first time in human history, one flower became more important than dollars, diamonds, or status.

Orphenatia (lat. Medicinae Viridis) was a universal cure for neurosis and for most respiratory disorders caused by the blitzkrieg violence known as the Third War, as well as for two diseases that almost mowed down the entire humankind right after the war: the New Plague and Mousepox. Green Orphenatia tea was used as a very effective mass cure - not just for the body, but for the psyche as well.

But Orphenatia did not come only in green. There was also a red Orphenatia. It was the so-called Bloody Orphenatia. It did not have any

medical effect. Regardless, it was planted all around medical institutes and hospitals because of its hypnotizing color. It was the color of a vivid wound, thickened blood; the raw color of first menstruation and last lost love; the color of a bomb-baked tongue and broken hope - but also the color of a beautiful woman's trembling passion and deep red Parisian rouge. Red Orphenatia was a living memory rising from the ashes of youth that did not make it. It was a symbol - like both Yin and Yang in one color - bright as the memory of a French kiss of true love and, at the same time, bitter as the hospital days of the wounded.

Marco Po was staring at one red Orphenatia just after he entered the reception room of "St. Paul" Psychiatric Institute in the city of Mered, Arnea State, sometime around 9 a.m. GMT+1. On that very morning, Marco had received a strange invitation. He was requested to show up at the Institute as soon as possible. The invitation seemed non-binding. Probably a routine check. He was unusually calm and, as usual, self-confident. After a short stare at the flower, his eyes shifted to his own reflection in the window glass.

Marco was so proud of himself. He loved his wide shoulders, firm chest, and muscular arms. He was neither short nor tall. His eyes were slightly downcast and very bright. Proud of his northern looks and bony face, he felt as if some kind of nobility shone from his white skin. But no matter how much he admired his appearance, he admired his own intelligence even more. He was never a hard-working type of person. After all, it didn't matter. He had enough money to achieve a top education without trying too hard. All he had to do was keep everything under control. And he did. Of course, there were some tiny issues - like the marriage to his ex-wife Ivy, that bitch, and the creature she gave birth to, and of course the unexpected war - but all in all, Marco felt like the most successful person in the world. He saw himself as the perfect mixture of everything a man could possibly possess: looks, money, mathematical intelligence, verbal intelligence, education, and even some musical talent, although he never played any instrument. Who, in this thousand-mile world, who except him, could say, "I have everything"?

There couldn't be any reason, except for a routine check, for someone like Marco to be at the Institute, he thought. Maybe they wanted his genes? Maybe they wanted to make clones - more people like him, useful to the New World and the New Order. Maybe they wanted his

biography? There must be some reason - glorious like his own reflection, beautiful as the red Orphenatia, or even more beautiful - beautiful like Marco Po himself.

After four minutes, a woman entered the room. She was dressed in a turquoise uniform. By the color of the uniform, Marco instantly realized she was a lower-rank psychologist. Lower-rank psychologists were those who had only completed a course. The New Order allowed it because of the lack of psychological support after the war - the victims outnumbered the staff, especially in the clinical field - so the elites allowed poor people who couldn't afford full studies to become clinicians after a 24-month course. Higher-rank psychologists had light blue uniforms, nurses had green ones, and doctors were dressed in white. Although the New Order claimed there were no higher or lower professions and that uniforms existed only for recognition purposes, Marco felt slightly disturbed. He felt contempt for this lower-ranked person.

But soon enough, he noticed it was a woman. A pretty but neglected woman. She had the face of an Italian actress and quite a nice body, although she carried a few extra pounds. Unfortunately, he thought, her hair was carelessly tied in a ponytail, she wore no makeup, and there was even a hair or two above her upper lip. Her skin had been slightly poisoned by war pollution, and she had a rash now and then, so Marco concluded she had definitely not been rich before the war. She was, without any doubt, lower middle class. She probably had some average education, some average, stupid husband who died of Mousepox, and maybe she was already divorced. Yes, she was definitely divorced. She is boring. Her husband got sick of her. Her boss was also sick of her. Probably her mother, too. She bored the hell out of both God and the devil. She probably hadn't had sex in years. She dreams of love above her league - of a man with at least one above-average quality, of a man with status even if it means he has the smallest penis on Earth. She dreams of a man others will be jealous of, and who will, after all, have one terrible flaw that will make him hate the rest of the world and come to her dark shithole, bitter as she is, cynical and eaten by pain. There will never be a New Order for women like her, he thought. There is no New Order that can erase the fact that, once upon a time, there was a world where she was just a miserable ant married to another miserable ant who despised her. He smiled, amused by his own thoughts.

There is this strange truth of Nature itself, he thought - the unstoppable order of Earth - that divides humans into people like him, Alphas, and people like her, Omegas. Even if she came before him with a ton of makeup, dressed in the most beautiful dress, he knew - she would always belong to the lower class of Nature, known as the class of weakness. It took him only ten minutes to evaluate her. In eleven minutes, he knew he could fool her, blind her, captivate her, and seduce her anytime he wanted. And that fact, for him, was boring.

“My name is Christine 13569558, and I am 36 years old. From now on, I will be your personal psychologist. I remind you, under Act No. 525265, that you are here by your own will and that you may leave at any time. However, under Act No. 5558686, it is highly recommended that you speak to your psychologist and cooperate. Your former psychiatrist, Helen 88958685, provided us with your health history and anamnesis, which is why you were invited for this conversation.”

“Yeah, I had some minor crisis…” he said unwillingly.

“So, your name is Marco Po. You are 42 years old, divorced, and you hold a PhD in mathematics. Confirm.”

Marco confirmed.

“This is a late PhD. What were you doing in the meantime?” she asked.

“Oh, I graduated in IT. I was working as a high school teacher. I got married. It seemed like a good idea back then.” He shrugged.

“Let’s go back in time for a moment. When you were eighteen, Marco, you had your first depressive episode. That was the first time you came to Dr. Helen. What happened back then?” Christine asked.

“Nothing special,” he answered. “I was chasing after some young chick. She kept rejecting me. It was a provocation. On purpose. Everything I had - money, looks, everything - it was like she was pretending she didn’t care about all that. And believe me, she was the sweetest candy on the table at the time. I have no idea what was in her head; her boyfriends were ugly or average ones… it was a provocation, I can bet on

it. God, she was stubborn. I followed her around sometimes. I was curious to know where she was going, what her interests were. Of course, she accused me of stalking. It was her little game against me. She even wanted to call the police - can you believe it? The police, because she was too dumb to admit how much she wanted me, too scared and weak to let that feeling out, to liberate her willing, craving body. Maybe she just wasn't aware of what she could have had. I was a real catch for her, even as a boy. Back then, I felt awakened, like there was a burning fire inside me. I felt like I had been bored and asleep until then. There was this moment, and I think I was chasing after her only to feel that moment again - that sparkle, that life that bloomed inside me. It was like I was awakened and my senses were alive, truly alive. Pure adrenaline and pure dopamine, I guess. It was such a contrast to my usual daily boredom. As I kept chasing that feeling, all I could feel for her was anger - more and more anger. I even started going to the gym often, hitting the punching bag and fantasizing about hitting her dumb head. Then her face just faded away, and I understood that, for me, she had never really existed. It was just my childish illusion, I guess…"

"Was that the main reason for your depression at the time?" Christine asked.

"Actually, I'm not sure. Melanie punished me for stalking. She never hit me, that's true, but her punishment strategies were quite creative. At the time, she locked me in a room with no heating and threatened to cut off my funds for my studies. But I was eighteen, and I didn't cry anymore. I wasn't a scared little boy. I ran away through the window," he said.

"And Melanie is… your mother?"

"Exactly," he gave a cold answer. "Father gave me some money and hid it from her. He's always been pretty stupid for not fighting her. If I were him, I'd kill the bitch, honestly. I was such an angry youngster - who would say I'd become such a success, eh? Eventually, she found out about the money Father gave me. And then she went on and on with her standard blabbering: how sorry she was that I was born, what a big mistake I was… you know, blah, blah… everything a standard mother thinks about her children but never dares to say out loud. Because, you know, mothers - they could have done a lot in life if they hadn't made the biggest mistake of their lives, if only they hadn't married an idiot and

had a child. Women are immature, suicidal creatures. They commit suicide without even realizing it. They do it out of their subconsciousness, out of their deep, dark mind that wants suffering and torture. Something in them wants to be punished. And I mean, they want to be punished so hard - not like they committed the sin, but like they are the sin themselves. Or sometimes, women are just plain stupid. I have no other explanation. No offense."

"None taken," Christine answered.

"And eventually, I was craving to leave the house. I was craving to go to those studies, and Melanie knew it. She knew how much I wanted it, and she kept threatening to take it away from me. Without those studies, I knew nothing could pull me out of the swamp of average life in the city of Mered. It frightened me to the core. It shook every bone in my body. So I guess, at one moment, there was no way out but depression. Not such an important part of my life, anyway. As you can see, I became a success, one way or another.

Allow me a brief digression: that girl who was pretending she didn't like me - I met her ten years later. It wasn't that girl anymore. The girl I had wanted didn't exist. This one was a woman with extra pounds, tiny wrinkles around her eyes, and messy hair. She wore a cheap sweater, and there was a pit of worry in her eyes. She had married some average prole from the lower middle class. She was exactly where she deserved to be. Paying bills, hating her job, hating her husband, bitter and miserable. I felt the sweet taste of revenge - like honey and cream on my lips - but it wasn't even satisfying. I felt pity. She couldn't awaken any feeling in me except some pity or disdain. Everything was so ordinary. She - (the woman whose name I don't even remember) - and I, the winner of all the wars in this world. I, the youngest and most quoted scientist on Stanford's list. Such a grotesque scene - an unattractive woman practically begging a handsome man for just half an hour of salvation. God, it was funny!"

"Such a poetic way to express it," Christine concluded.

"I'll take that as a compliment," he smiled.

“How about the entrance exam for your studies? Did you have any problems with it?” she asked.

“Except for Melanie’s threats to kick me out of the house if I failed - nothing special. I passed, of course.”

“I suppose your success in the exams during your studies cured your depression?”

“Partially. I enjoyed going out. It was a big city; I had lots of opportunities for getting laid. I forgot that chick quite soon. I even forgot Melanie and Dad. You know, we can only share a moment with others. When the moment goes away, we become ourselves again - self-sufficient, bored, and completely released from the chains of any memory. It’s so naive to believe that a moment can last. I was a bit disappointed in my own naivety, but any blue feeling went away as quickly as it arose. I wanted to get laid. I wanted to drink. To try drugs, to go out, to get attention. I wanted to burn some torches.

I dated a nutcase for three months and realized they were all the same. From time to time, I dreamed of the most beautiful woman. I daydreamed about how we would lose our virginity together, then walk downtown in spring while everyone looked at us with envy. But a man dreams, and a man wakes up. And then a man finds a nutcase.

You try her somewhere in a dirty toilet, and you realize it’s all the same. While she was blowing me, I realized she had a much better body than the one I used to love. She had bigger tits, too. If I could dress her well, maybe I could show her off in my hometown. But dear God, she was silly. You could see “low class” written all over her face. It was in her words, her clothes, her hygiene habits. I think her name was Tiana.

I lost my virginity with her, disgusted, lying in a puddle of her bodily fluids. It happened in a poor student’s room smelling of cheap tobacco and baked potatoes. I did it as if it wasn’t my first time. I tried her wide vagina, her anus, her sweet, skillful tongue. Afterward, I went for a drink. I was thinking about my fall into the arms of this trashy woman, this societal scumbag. Tiana was a banal replacement for real life. I wanted more. I deserved more. But still, some invisible demon was choking me

with mediocrity. Something was dragging me into the ghetto of the capital.

If I were poor, if there were no studies… I'd belong to the lower middle class - a name in squalor, a bloodless name consisting solely of numbers… oh, I can't even think of it! A simple name with no sense and no letters, a symbol of a miserable, cowardly imitation of life; a symbol of the class of chickens who comply in order to eat and fuck what they must instead of what they want; the class of those who are happy to dive their heads between the legs of pathetic peasants like Tiana.

Luckily, I had many women after her. But it didn't matter. All the time I had a strange feeling, as if I were doing someone else's job. It was like I was ridden by the ghosts of dead men who wanted to enjoy instead of me. I was like a machine, working only as much as needed, careful not to overheat. I had lost my moment - the moment when I could feel anything - and everything else became plain."

While speaking, Marco had the feeling he was talking to himself, as if Christine were not in the room at all. He saw her somewhere down below him. He hated being there, at the Institute. Just sitting across from a woman who used to belong to the lower middle class made him tremble. Christine should judge a man like him? That's funny. Is that what the New Order thinks of him? What a grotesque idea. That must be some strange game of the New Age - creating an illusion that we are all equal in order to keep the proles under control.

But still… this woman… she was the authority over him. She was supposed to judge him and evaluate his mental health? What a farce.

On the other hand, Christine was neutral. It wasn't her natural ability; it was something that had grown inside her after the war and the PTSD she had survived. She wasn't eager to go too deep during the first meeting with this man. She knew exactly when the session should end. She wrote in her report that Marco Po was cooperative, talkative, even honest.

"Thank you for your cooperation. The Institute would be grateful if you could have a few more sessions with me," she said.

Marco felt uneasy. But still, he was curious. What does the Institute want? Does it see him as some kind of new step in human evolution? Convinced that the Institute needed him for his ingenious mind, he was eager to schedule another session with Christine. He had no respect for her, nor for psychology in general. He considered psychology a kind of witchcraft with a little statistical spice added to it.

As he slowly and confidently stepped out of the office, Christine felt a flicker of curiosity. She couldn’t stop wondering what was hiding behind his shell of gentlemanly politeness and that blurry, yet furious, fantasy of perfection.

Chapter 2

Summer Rain

June 29th, 2064
Tuesday

It was dawn. Humid, fresh air and soft dark clouds predicted rain. The city was sound asleep - silent and absent. The comfortable darkness of eyelids drifting away; bodies under warm sheets, still sticky and moist from the previous night's touches; beds hot from splashes of lonely passion; rooms cold from air-conditioned solitude… all of it gave a magical mist of peace to that early morning.

Christine was awake. A coconut-scented candle was lit in her room. A half-empty glass of sweet sangria stood on the table. A mild breath of dawn entered through the window while she typed her notes on the laptop. She never deleted her notes. She kept them in the cloud forever, hoping that some of her words or research would manage to reach immortality. That was the strangest thing about Christine: she wanted to live forever and, at the same time, she craved death.

It was precisely five o'clock and sixteen minutes. Christine sat at the edge of her bed and lit a cigarette. She took a sip of strong black coffee. Awakened by muscle restlessness, she thought about the eternal mammoth drawings in human caves - that primitive attempt at immortality. She kept wondering whether anything she created would outlive her body. But she was not upset. She had no nightmares. Her early awakenings and insomnia seemed to come out of nowhere.

Christine had suffered from pre-war depression for fifteen years and, of course, post-war PTSD. Maybe it was even complex PTSD. She used to be overloaded with wild anger - the blindness of a savage who had suffered great injustice for a very long time. She used to dream about vengeance. She wanted the blood of paid dues on her hands. She wanted to piss on the graves of those who had hurt her. She had no idea how her hot urine, with traces of menstrual blood, could hurt some dead bodies underground. All she knew was that she was bloodthirsty. There was a wild bull tied to her chest with rusted chains. Sometimes, it roared in pain. It was the roar of the lost generation.

Young Arneans were given life imprisonment. Their only crime was their birth. They didn't know why they had been suffering for so long. Maybe it was original sin, maybe primordial guilt, maybe ancestor syndrome. They were slowly getting used to suffering, realizing that there are no rules for survival - only luck or curse. And so, young Arneans were named "the lost generation."

It was getting colder. The rain started. Christine covered her feet with a moist blanket. Fresh summer sweat made curls in her hair, and morning dew clung to her eyelashes. The heat wave had ended, but she could still feel the weight of heavily breathable, humid air. But air wasn't the only wet thing in the room. The moisture of desire lingered over her thighs. She hadn't felt passion for years.

At first, before the war, she had been taking antidepressants that made her numb. She considered herself a legal junkie, but she couldn't live a day without medication. Levaxa, Prozac, Citalopram. She tried them all. And, of course, Valium. Sometimes even booze. When times got really tough, she would take sedatives with red beer or fruit wine. Her alcoholic phase didn't last very long.

Then the war came. People were locked in their houses. There was a curfew every night. Electricity restrictions. Epidemics. Humanitarian aid. Camera drones. Bombing drones. Suicide drones. Tank tracks. Detonations. Diarrhea caused by fear. But also, the strange joy of uncertainty. Maybe, people thought, if we survive, the future won't be so dark.

After the war, life didn't instantly become better. Christine had to come off antidepressants. She also developed strong PTSD. She had insomnia, nausea, vomiting, nightmares. Memories of tank noises and missile defense systems. Cravings for coffee and chocolate. The strange feeling as if someone were opening and closing a zipper inside her brain. And finally, sour tears over a wasted life.

As time passed, Christine got a chance. She finished the so-called "lower psychology course." The New Order gave her a job she found quite satisfying. She was no longer a slave to working hours, strict hierarchy, bosses' whims, or profit. Everything was different. She was a human

being again, after a very long time. She was no longer a servant of someone else's narcissism.

But old habits die hard.

Two years after the war, the nightmares stopped. Christine no longer needed medication or therapy. But she remained frigid. Her feet were cold and numb, and sometimes she couldn't sleep. Feeling no need for intimacy, no need for love, she was somehow dry. She had no desire even for simple, raw sex, and as time passed, she grew used to it.

To keep herself amused without intimacy, she developed certain rituals, such as swimming, long hot showers, and reading books during lonely evenings. Her day always started with washing her face with cold water, aggressive teeth brushing, and slowly sipping strong black coffee. The day usually ended with more hygienic rituals and a big mug of green Orphenatia tea. And sometimes, of course, a good old drink.

Still, Christine enjoyed one silly habit she had kept since the pre-war era: after coming home from work, she would remove her black military lace-up shoes, place them by the bed, and leave her socks inside the shoes, like a soldier. She wore the same socks for two or three days, until they developed the sweet smell of feet and sweat. Her blood is not noble, she thought, but it still seemed to her that her fresh sweat, her worn socks, even her skin in general, smelled very gentle and pleasant. She smelled like a noblewoman. But she was just an Arnean.

After all, she had no last name. Regular citizens had numbers instead of surnames. Noblemen had family names. It was the only difference between noble and regular bloodlines that had remained from the old times. Sometimes Christine would remember an Englishman she had slept with before the war. He was a nobleman - even a lord. But his feet had smelled terribly. It was strange, she thought - how could God and the British queen (Queen Elizabeth II at the time) allow this lord to smell like a working-class laborer, and one Arnean girl to smell like brown sugar and flowers?

Even though her cynicism was often hidden, Christine still felt deep sadness. She felt it in her chest, in her stomach, in her shaking hands - she was afraid that the past might repeat itself. She tried to kill the

sadness with hard work. She loved her job as a psychologist, but she didn't deceive herself. She knew that green Orphenatia was the only real cure for her patients. She, as a professional, was just a pleasant face to be seen, and her patients would do just fine without her. She was still quite easily replaceable. She was not special, not an expert, and certainly not an angel or a saint. So her life kept ticking, second by second, hour by hour, like a perfect Swiss watch.

But this very morning, she was obviously aroused. A strong sense of passion grew inside her stomach, where wild bulls lived. There was a wellspring of sweet liquid between her legs and a damp spot on her bed. After a long time, she yearned for a man again.

Unable to fall asleep - especially after strong coffee - she took a shower. Her body bore marks of the past, but it was still soft and firm, and she placed her hand between her legs. Her thoughts were dirty, rough, and fierce. The black man in her imagination had no name - only wild strength and savage desire. He took everything he wanted from her. At first, it was a forceful dance in an old, post-war house in one of the abandoned ghost towns. He was dressed entirely in black, while she was naked. Only his pants were slightly unzipped so he could enter her again and again. Then they did it again in a train full of people who were watching and craving. She didn't care about the electric eye - the all-seeing spying machine. She couldn't think; she could only feel.

And just before her fingers brought her to climax, she thought of Marco. She orgasmed intensely. There was no doubt she was deeply attracted to Marco Po.

And logically, she hated that.

Filled with bitter self-disappointment, she roughly dried her body with a towel. She went to bed and tried to read a book. She couldn't concentrate. She tried to watch a TV show called "20th Century Terrors" about an anorexic woman with double-D silicone breasts who wanted even bigger ones in order to look like a sex doll. That made her both amused and disgusted.

Then she thought of Marco again. She desperately wanted to fuck Marco Po. She also really disliked Marco Po. And again, she caught herself

making plans to have an affair with Marco after the therapy ended - without violating professional ethics. And without hurting herself. It seemed impossible. Actually, it was impossible.

Suddenly, her boss sent her a message on Epal (a social network).

“You got up early today. What’s wrong?” (smiley face)

“Oh, don’t worry, Peter. Just some mild insomnia. I’ll solve that with a cup of Orphenatia,” Christine typed back.

“I thought, since you’re already awake, we could have a coffee at the ‘Roadhouse Blues’ café. We can have a meeting there so you don’t have to come to work tomorrow. I’ll bring the materials. Of course, if you agree to accept the patient.”

“Which patient?” she laughed. “I have twenty.”

“The Wednesday guy. That PhD blondie. That little sissy pretending to be an alpha. I know you dislike summer, and I tried not to give you heavy patients during the season, but this is something new and exciting. And very important - both for the Institute and the State.”

Christine went pale. Her heart pounded with excitement and fear, and she wasn’t just slightly scared - she was agonized. But she couldn’t reject such a case. It was a once-in-a-lifetime patient - both approachable and mystical, attractive and disgusting, cowardly and abusive, pathetic and admirable. He was an enigma. An ancient riddle of the Sphinx. A secret of the underworld. A message from the devil himself. It was a great challenge. Her ego couldn’t simply let him go to someone else.

“I’ll be at Roadhouse Blues in half an hour. Order me a cold latte.” She pressed “send” and put her shoes on.

Chapter 3

Roadhouse Blues

June 29th, 2064
Tuesday

“You know, sometimes I have this vivid feeling that everything we survived will happen again. But it gives me strength to do this job. I’d even do it for free. If I can’t stop the eternal cycle of good and evil, I can at least do something to stop one abuse, to save at least one innocent creature from the agony of abuse. Especially narcissistic abuse. But I’m blabbing… I make no sense… Do you know when I realized the old capitalist world would collapse?” Peter said while sipping Irish coffee at “Roadhouse Blues.”

“When the war started?” Christine guessed.

“No, no - long before,” he said. “It was the moment when my neighbor bought his fancy new car, the latest Audi, and then it got stuck in a pothole. Funny, isn’t it? You don’t invest in the common good, you keep everything for yourself, just to realize - it’s useless. You can’t drive your new car if no one is there to fix the roads. At that moment, I realized: we are all one.”

“And you also realized that your neighbor was a moron who couldn’t think ahead more than forty-eight hours?”

“Exactly. You know, if you stare into those potholes long enough, you can see the abyss,” he said.

“Boss, you’re a psychiatrist. At least you should know: there are people who love the abyss and hell. Chaos is their natural habitat, and only through chaos can they rule.”

“Christine, I’m not your boss. I’m your supervisor named Peter. So call me Peter - Peter is just fine.” He smiled. “Tell me, my dear, are you all right these days?”

“Is it possible to lie to you?” she answered.

“You can try.”

“I’m anhedonic. I’m frigid. I need an earthquake to move me. It’s like… I don’t feel anything. I just lie awake at night thinking how I’ll always be the one whose ancestors were just numbers, just slaves… Always the one who couldn’t gain education at the right time, who lost thirty years of her life fighting just to survive. I’m the one Finracs[1] used to call ‘just a worker.’ One dead, one alive - it doesn’t matter. Our lives were cheaper than a condom. And we pretended we didn’t see it. I wasted my one and only opportunity for real education back in the day. And, Peter, I don’t have a last name - I have bloody numbers! I feel like nobody actually sees me. Eh, never mind… Bloodline is bloodline.”

“Their bloodline was the only thing they had,” Peter said. “And they know that very well. Chris, you are a smart and beautiful woman. Being non-Aryan means nothing. Maybe Pontius Pilate was Aryan. Maybe Amon Göth was Aryan. And what has history said about them?”

“Do you believe that Pontius Pilate killed a god?” she asked.

“No, I don’t. He definitely killed a good man, but not a god. But you could say I believe that Amon and people like him killed the god in each and every one of us.”

“It’s funny,” Christine said. “We discuss these philosophical, abstract things, and our own lives… You know, the last time I was happy, I was in high school. I don’t remember if I’ve ever truly loved. The only success I’ve achieved lately is managing to masturbate to orgasm this morning.”

“Well, okay,” Peter laughed. “Someone once died on a cross so you could enjoy your sins. Well… was it good?”

“It was beautiful,” she said.

“Well, you know what they say: once you find a good recipe for bread, bake it every day,” he giggled.

[1] The superior nation in Arnea

She didn't dare admit that she was attracted to the patient - and not just any patient, but one of the worst. The enemy of the State, the enemy of humanity, the enemy of life itself.

"I wanted to talk to you about work, if you agree," Peter grew serious. "I would like you to lead the case of Marco Po. Do you have any conclusions about him so far?"

"His education is suspicious," she concluded.

"Well, whose education isn't suspicious? During those chaotic pre-war days, they could buy a diploma - even an MSc, a PhD, anything you wanted. Ten thousand bucks and you were good to go. Education was a measure of wealth, not knowledge. And his father was rich."

"And I will dare to say," Christine whispered, "he seems way too perfect. Too kind, too handsome, too tidy. Even too convincing by being slightly misogynistic, so you get the impression that he was hurt by the women he loved the most. He is a perfect cliché. Like a silly, handsome character in a romantic comedy. It's just not realistic. It's a mask. The question is: what's down there, behind the mask? Autist, murderer, psychotic, borderline? It could be anything."

"He is a malignant narcissist," Peter said.

"He is… what?" she was surprised, even though she had considered that possibility.

"Narcissist. Just that. NPD. Malignant, psychopathic type. Sadistic elements in his personality. Misogynistic, overtly aggressive. Prone to depression and erectile dysfunction. Tested by Dr. Helen before the war, right after his third depressive episode."

"Is the diagnosis final?" Christine asked, hoping that this terrifying diagnosis might be wrong.

"He was tested twice. I wouldn't doubt it," Peter answered.

"He was quite honest…" she said.

“Well, he is intelligent - there’s no doubt about that either. He accepted sessions with you, Christine. It’s uncommon for a narcissist to voluntarily agree to conversations with a psychologist. Maybe he’s trying to outsmart us. I would like you to accept this patient. No matter what you think about yourself, you are the only one I’ve found wise enough not to be manipulated. You survived the old times with surprising strength and depth, after all… I’ll send you everything we have on him - videos from some hotels and hallways, passport records, diplomas, exam files. We don’t have much. You can extract more by talking to him.”

“We already had a conversation. He told me about a girl he was stalking when he was a teenager. He had a bad mother. I expected him to have slightly abnormal psychopathy, but I also expected some preserved empathy and remorse. But malignant narcissist… come on. I didn’t expect that. What are we going to do with a narcissist - and a malignant one at that?” she asked.

“To cure him,” Peter said coolly.

“But that’s impossible!”

“Maybe it’s not. We’ll run an experiment - the first of its kind in history. We’ll recruit fifty narcissists willing to take part in the experiment, and we’ll conduct one very risky and very expensive treatment using complete isolation. I’ll explain everything. For now, study his material and study him. I’ll give you his file. Of course, if you agree to take him?”

Christine silently took the rum and poured it into her latte. Then she took the files and put them in her bag.

“I’ll take him,” she nodded, uncertain why she was accepting this Sisyphean task.

Peter raised the bottle of rum and made a toast, looking at her with fascination, admiring her bravery and strength, knowing how much damage contact with such malignancy could do to her psyche. Luckily, her ambition was stronger than the scent of danger. He took a sip of the booze and whispered:

“Welcome to the making of history.”

Chapter 4

Miss Andrea

July 2nd, 2064
Friday

“I can’t pee when you’re looking at me.” That’s what Tyler Durden says while trying to urinate in the food he’s about to serve to snobs. They were playing Fight Club on TV again. It was the fifth time that week. The New Order saw this movie as a cult for some reason. It had been considered a cult in the old days, too - probably without any hidden reason or agenda. The film is just good. Or alternatively, the government knew no one could truly hurt the system, and they knew they could sell anything - even a direct anti-government movie or book. The most powerful tyranny is always the one so silent, ghostly, and shape-shifting that even the truth cannot shake it.

Tyler somehow managed to pee, even though we were all looking at him. Christine muted the TV. She loved the movie, but she was so full of self-hatred that she could only cry and wallow in self-pity.

“Don’t worry, Mom…” she wrote on a piece of paper, trying to breathe and see through wet, sweaty eyelashes that blurred her vision. “Don’t worry, Mom, don’t worry… I won’t fail you again. A new life has been given to me. This time, I will create history instead of dreaming. I will move from the dead spot. I’ll take a blue pill and start my studies at an elite school. And after I graduate as one of the elite, I will never find out what it’s like to be a slave. And no one - no one - will abuse me over and over again until they bury me alive in fear. It is my fault, Mom, it’s my fault that I am nobody. I didn’t use the only chance I was given. Everything you invested in me is wasted in meaningless mornings only because I didn’t dare to try to enter elite studies. But this time, Mom, this time… I will be proud and believe that I can become a real person, not the shadow I used to be…”

It was just blabbering. Christine didn’t believe what she was writing. She knew it was too late. Long ago, she had received a scholarship to go abroad, but she couldn’t leave Arnea. She graduated from a “poor people’s college,” and there was no turning back. Everything she could

do after losing her only chance was just pale redemption and a great waste of time. Being so quickly turned away from the talented ones - from those who shine - and thrown among the invisible proles, she discovered how regular people were treated. It took only one moment, one blink of an eye, to decide her fate, and an invisible hand cast her into the ocean of waste.

Now, living among bedbugs that devoured one another to survive, she learned what it meant to live without mercy. The New Order couldn't fix that: her personality had been permanently changed, and there was nothing left she could truly give to the world. To make destiny even crueler, she could no longer love. There was nothing left to give even to a single person.

She turned off the TV and tried to read. At first, she read about the Stanford Prison Experiment, wondering why it reminded her so much of pre-war Arnea. It was ghetto psychology. Just like Arnea, it was a place that wasn't a place in the geographical sense, but a place that existed as a state of mind - a place where every narcissist could freely destroy your personality to the point where you could no longer give anything, and legally put your mind in a state of complete conviction that you could not physically escape because you were worthless and no other place on Earth needed you.

There was no God above Arnea. There was only Zimbardo watching them through the lens of an expensive camera. Arnea was a state experiment. Arnea was an exquisite tragicomedy - a place where professors gave students straight A's only to hand them worthless degrees that would eventually enable graduates to work in a booth without a toilet. So you ended up with a country full of talented graduates shitting in a plastic bag on the cold floor of a booth.

Emotionally degraded, punished for their good deeds, Arneans ran across the border - but out there, they could only find themselves again. They were third-class citizens, deceiving themselves into believing they meant anything more than mere slaves to this world, to Zimbardo, to God himself. They had no God. God had left them long ago, under the shadow of a war that had only been a matter of time.

But before the war, Arnean intelligence - including people like Christine - had to go through six phases of brainwashing under peacetime conditions:

Phase one: Identity destruction - Christine and others were made to believe they were completely useless. Academic titles, occupations, human values - all were humiliated to the point of dehumanization. Humiliation was subtly supported by the media and crudely performed by the informal environment. The subject was turned into an ordinary number and degraded in every possible way, reduced to nothing but a domestic animal.

Phase two: Guilt - It was ensured that the person became convinced it was her own fault for being mistreated.

Phase three: Self-betrayal - The person became ready to do anything for the mistreatment to stop, but there were no real opportunities.

Phase four: Breaking point - The person collapsed into harsh and sudden mental deterioration.

Phase five: Leniency and acceptance - The person accepted the new personality and new role as something unworthy, not special in any way, good for nothing, alive only by the mercy of the “better” others.

Phase six: Rebirth or mental illness - The person either accepted the new personality and was willing to live with it, turning it into a new Self, a new “I,” or, if unable to accept it, broke into emotional crisis and mental breakdowns, which were then treated with different types of medical therapy.

Those phases Christine recognized were based on Dr. Lifton’s ten phases of brainwashing described in his book, but somehow she couldn’t stop her emotional reactions. From time to time, she had crises. She couldn’t accept her uselessness. Even her last name was a number, yet she couldn’t accept it. Something inside her was screaming and crying that she was a being - a human being - and, as such, she deserved to be treated like one.

“Don’t worry, Mom…” she wrote, swallowing tears of salt and adrenaline. “I will work as hard as a horse. And I will prove myself to them, to all of them…”

At that point, in order not to think, she took Marco Po’s file.

There was nothing special about him: a student booklet with some bad marks, a driver’s license, a few videos from hotels, browser history, recordings of a few phone calls during a fight with his ex-wife, some data about his depressive episodes, a repeated NPD test that proved nothing, old photos of his mother with withered eyes - that iron lady who had never wanted a child anyway, and so on.

There was nothing one could definitively conclude from his file.

But Christine noticed one detail: the first-ranked list of entrance exam results. Marco Po had not passed the entrance exam. But a week later, there was a new ranking list stating that there had been a mistake in Po’s results and that he had, in fact, passed.

Christine thought it was an obvious setup.

But who had done this favor for Marco - and why?

She decided to check some videos from that period of his life. She took a disk titled “Moscow Hotel 24211” and pressed play. She smiled at the number on the disc - she concluded that there were doubtlessly over 20,000 videos from that hotel during that one year alone. Really, 20,000 videos that deserved to be saved in just one hotel, during only one year. It was as if every single person who had ever entered that hotel - to cheat on a wife, to make an OnlyFans video, to have a private conversation, or for any other reason - could be blackmailed through some personal secret. And God knows why all that data even existed, if we were nothing but useless animals.

The video titled “Moscow Hotel 24211” showed Marco Po in a hallway in front of room 16. A man leaned closely behind him. The man wore a bright red wig and a short PVC skirt. He had drag makeup.

“Dan, can you guarantee that you’ll do what you promised?” Marco asked.

“Consider it done,” said the transgender person. “Just, please, call me Miss Andrea tonight.”

A man’s got to do what a man’s got to do.

Christine was never so lucky as to be paid that well for a one-night stand. She could only envy Marco. Her price had been just a few lies and the hope for better days to come. But Marco was so attractive that one night with Miss Andrea gave him entry into a prestigious university. She stopped the video. A man did what he had to do. She didn’t want to use her own bitterness against somebody. It wasn’t Marco’s fault that she hadn’t been lucky in the poker game of life.

She remembered the words of one contemporary philosopher, Nicholaevich:

“The problem with every political system is that the top government, at one point, loses insight into everything happening below them. Information gets swallowed into a deep black hole of middle management and corrupted local authorities who claim that everything is in perfect order, while they manipulate citizens by using fear to prevent them from expressing how they really feel. This usually happens in the middle of a system’s lifetime.

People we call narcissists and sociopaths use all means to buy the support of greedy little people and reach their main goals: position, title, education, and status. Then, in order to drown their dark thirst for love - which they cannot feel and cannot conquer - they grab as many useless trophies as they can: cars, branded clothes, women, medals, diplomas - basically anything that can give them a moment of relief, self-love, and identity. But it’s just a moment. After that moment, they feel dead and empty again. They become even more bitter, and the thirst grows stronger. The greed grows. The greed becomes an unstoppable, insatiable monster.

Their goal is no longer to gain and invest. Their goal becomes destruction, followed by a subconscious craving for self-destruction. A

simple abuser usually commits a crime of passion - killing his wife, then himself. But we never think that greed might also be a complex form of passion crime: the narcissistic passion for power, with the illogical and pointless goal of destroying everything around them until reaching the final goal. And the final goal is the destruction of the self they are not even aware of.

It is the same old madness consisting of homicide with a final touch of suicide, only set in a much wider and more complex environment. It is the fragmented conscience of malignants who cannot stand life in bloom - the beauty of a simple flower, the sound of a waterfall, the dance of a ballerina, the taste of chocolate. In a word, they cannot stand happiness and peace. For them, chocolate has no taste unless there is a hungry and suffering man watching them eat it. For them - and for their sake - you must suffer. Your suffering is their only joy and the only path they can take.

They are ready to sacrifice time to succeed, but not for success itself - rather to spread chaos and injustice everywhere they go. This is why the only way for a system to survive longer than the usual 80–100 years is to remain modest. One must spend only as much as one has. Essential goods must be distributed evenly. There is nothing malignants hate more than being equal to everyone else.

And the moment they manage to destroy this modesty and sustainable development, every day for every person on this planet becomes heavy, sad, and illogical. That moment is the malignants' triumph. That moment is when the system slowly begins to collapse. It is the moment every top government should fear.

Therefore, if the top government's goals are sane and focused on long-term power and stability, it must ensure that people with narcissistic personality disorder are removed from every important position in society. Give them something else. Celebrate them as models, actors, singers, performers, poets - whatever. Keep them away from any possibility of killing the order. Those malignant people are walking Thanatos - bringers of disease, frustration, and destruction, the four horsemen of unthinkable horrors. And they have only one goal: to turn order into chaos."

While thinking about this, Christine took Marco's file again. She briefly reviewed his NPD tests - both positive. According to the results, Marco had narcissistic personality disorder with strong antisocial and sadistic tendencies. He also hated women. A true misogynist. He was described as asexual, since he hated bringing pleasure to women, yet he was capable of having robotic sexual relations with both sexes if he could gain something from it.

His browser history showed an intensive presence on social networks and a great deal of chatting with different women, regardless of their looks or status. Even if he was undoubtedly asexual, the browser history showed that he watched pornography. The material included forceful sex with powerless and disabled older women, or pity sex with women who had various physical flaws and were verbally humiliated during the act. His psychological files documented repeated issues with erectile dysfunction. Yet his browser history showed that Marco had never searched for solutions to this problem. He didn't seem to care much, knowing that he usually lost his erection whenever he saw a woman happy.

With men or trans people, the hatred was somewhat milder, though still present. He wasn't attracted to men either, but he found relations with them easier and freer of the heavy emotions that usually made him feel suffocated. All the bitter hatred toward women led him to have sex with men - but only if the lover would boost his career or enable him to achieve an important financial gain.

Still, none of this was proof that Marco was a devil. There could be mistakes. There could be misunderstandings. Christine knew how many malignant people existed in the world and how they operated; still, she refused to believe she could be attracted to such a monster. But yes, she was aroused by the devil. And it made her feel so guilty that she had to consider the possibility that some part of him might be good.

It was a foolish thing to believe. After all, even if he got out of the institution, even if she got him into bed, that would be just sex and nothing more. Is touching the devil such a terrible sin if it leads nowhere and hurts nobody? Still, guilt was eating her alive. We all want our chosen lover to be a good man. There is a bit of love in every passion, and how can we give something so sacred to a malignant? Christine

thought that a god who created such a beautiful devil could not be a good god.

But she was thinking too far ahead. Right now, there was a job to do. There was an experiment to prepare. The job had to be done, no matter what. It was her chance for a legacy, for immortality, for meaning. And, even more important, it was his chance for a cure.

She had to focus.

It seemed as if Peter himself were ironically whispering in her ear:

“What are you planning to do, my silly girl? Do you want to fuck or make history?”

And whispering again:

“Shall we show the world how frivolous we are? Are we about to give them a reason to gossip that serious tasks should never be delegated to women? Are we going to allow them to call us stupid centuries from now?”

And again, his voice was like a blade:

“Will you send a message to the world that your old boss, that hyena, was right to kick you out into the streets like a dirty, worn-out sock?”

“No, never!” Christine rebelled in her thoughts, sobbing again.

“Never, never again!” she kept repeating.

Chapter 5

The Fight

July 7th, 2064
Wednesday

As Kolarovsky said, there are three types of demons: the monstrous, the grotesque, and the tragic.

The first one, the monstrous demon, is actually the devil as Christians see him. He is obvious. His metaphorical horns and tail cannot be hidden. As such, we see him clearly. And we run for our lives when we see him. The monstrous demon is pure evil, easy to spot, and we know he will harm us as soon as we meet him. There is no dilemma, no manipulation - the devil is the devil, and humanity recognizes him as such, so you don't need to prove to anyone that this monstrous demon is no good. Everyone will believe his victims and the cruelties he is capable of.

The grotesque demon is just a charlatan. He is dumb and incapable. Sometimes he is consumed by greed and lust and is clearly mean. He is a bad guy, but not a very powerful one. He is the one we laugh at, the one we outsmart. He is not stronger than a regular man, and humans are not afraid of him. In pictures, he is small, ugly, and tiny, hidden behind a veil, with the laughter of a hyena and rotten teeth. The grotesque demon is not wise, and that is his comic misfortune.

The third, the tragic demon, is the demon of literature, art, and style. He is mysterious, icy, and proud. His self-esteem and dignity make him eye-catching. He is handsome or beautiful - a perfect image of a seductive and kind manipulator - and his actions are so cunning that he leaves us broken, believing the torture he gave us was our own fault.

Peter always used to say that the monstrous demon is an archaic word for a psychopath or antisocial personality - terrifying and obvious; the grotesque demon is a histrionic persona, obviously comical, which makes him or her harmless; the tragic demon, on the other hand, is a pure narcissist - a hidden, skillful manipulator capable of ruining your life without you even noticing it.

Peter had always seen the third devil as a symbol of the Old World Order. In theory, Christine agreed with this classification. But when she met the demon in reality, looked him in the eye, she became convinced there was no division. There was one and only one devil. The only difference lay in how we see him - and ourselves.

If we see the grotesque demon, it means we see ourselves as smarter and stronger. We see him as no threat to us, though he may still be a threat to someone else. If we see the monstrous creature, that too is only our perception. He might not be, objectively, more powerful than we are, but our fear makes him so. The difference between these two demons lies only in our fear.

The tragic demon is no different. The only thing that can transform a grotesque or monstrous demon into a tragic one is the fact that we are sexually attracted to him or her. All his power lies in our lust. Once that lust finds warmth in someone else's bed, all his power is gone. But the tragic demon is dangerous. Passion is sometimes stronger than fear, even though we are afraid. We ignore the fear; we rush straight into his hell, fully aware that he will break us in the end.

Both theories are, in their own way, correct. The Old World Order is, exactly like the tragic demon, very attractive at first. It promises freedom, possibilities for success, and the good old American dream. But once you grow old or sick, once you are no longer useful to the money-making machine, you begin to see its true nature. If you are no longer useful, you are no longer a person - just disposable trash dumped in a bin.

If you are no longer a good and productive employee, your entire identity collapses, especially if you loved your job or had big, naïve dreams of finding your place in a generation that would bring change. But you won't. Meaninglessness becomes an omnipresent fog wherever you go. You breathe the fog in, you breathe the fog out, you live the fog. And you wonder: what will happen when I become just a product with an expiration date? Where do we go when we are stuck between uselessness and death? What happens when too many of us are trapped between being undead, yet not productive enough to be considered alive?

The Big War was a logical answer. We could predict it. It was necessary to eliminate human resources whose talents or output were no longer needed. And when the first bullet was fired, we still didn't want to believe that our hopes, our minds, our dreams, and our creations were nothing more than necessary budget cuts.

While Christine was thinking about the past, Marco Po entered the office. He was freshly showered and shaved. He wore a cotton tracksuit, and she noticed he wasn't wearing any underwear. She remained highly professional.

"I made some Orphenatia tea for us," she said. "A useful plant, indeed. It calms."

"Any reason to be upset, doc?" he asked confidently.

"I'm not a doctor. There's no need for big titles," Christine said, even though titles did mean something to her. She had been humiliated her whole life for not having an adequate one.

"To me, you're a doctor. My favorite so far," he flirted.

"Well, you may call me whatever you wish, as long as we maintain good communication," she replied, keeping the atmosphere professional, though she couldn't avoid noticing him adjusting his pants to make it clear he wasn't wearing underwear.

"Let's get to the point," Christine said. "I want you to know that you are here completely on a voluntary basis. Every war survivor is precious to us, and we want to work with you only for your own sake."

"What's your point?" he asked suspiciously.

Christine pulled out his file and placed it on the table. His face remained calm, but his mouth opened slightly. She noticed a trace of saliva at the corner of his lips. Increased salivation was a sign of fear. His neck also became slightly red and sweaty. She had been trained to notice the smallest signs of fear in people who usually maintained a flat facial expression.

“Have I done something wrong?” he asked.

“To be honest, Marco, I haven’t even checked your entire file. There’s a lot of material here. State services have collected data on all citizens. The files are filled with irrelevant videos, official records, even browser histories. It’s like an entire little life in a cardboard box. Pandora’s box, I’d say,” she added with a light giggle. “Of course, no one ever looks at that data. Unless it’s needed. And, well… we need you now.”

“This looks more like a police interrogation than a conversation with a psychologist. I’m not feeling very comfortable,” Marco said.

“Oh, don’t worry. You are free to leave at any time. Nothing you say will be used against you,” she answered with a smile.

“Nothing can be used against me,” he said.

“Nothing should,” she replied with another calm smile. “The Institute only wants to know whether there is any possibility of recurrent depression. We are here to keep people safe - from others, but from themselves as well.”

“I’ve never felt better, my dear doc!” he smiled. “Do you know that I was voted the most significant scientist in Mered before the war? My achievements cannot be erased by a minor change in the political or economic system. I am important to this country. And it feels so damn great!”

“Speaking of your achievements - which I, without any doubt, consider impressive - may I ask why you had a ten-year gap between your bachelor’s and doctoral studies?”

“I was dedicated to my marriage. There is time for everything,” he replied calmly.

“Interesting… You began your master’s studies at the exact time your wife sold her properties for 400,000 dollars - which is precisely the cost of both your master’s and doctoral studies. So your wife essentially paid for your education?” she asked.

“Are you questioning my education?” Marco was clearly insulted.

“Oh, no, no, I’m deeply sorry if I sound like an investigator,” Christine smiled politely. “Education was expensive back in our days. I personally couldn’t afford anything special. I was just a bachelor with honors, not a reviewer, and I have no right to ask such questions. I was simply curious about one thing: why would you divorce such a loving woman - one who paid for your studies, did all the chores, took care of the children, and loved you unconditionally? Most people would say such a woman is pure gold.”

“She initiated the divorce. She claimed she felt abused. But didn’t I feel abused? Who asked me how I felt? Maybe she saw me as nothing but a money-making machine who needed to educate himself more and more to earn more and more money? You weren’t there during our marriage - how can you know? Maybe I was the victim of female greed.” He made a convincing, sorrowful facial expression as he spoke.

“I don’t deny that possibility. Cameras and robots cannot measure one’s pain. Do you know that some women aren’t convicted even if they kill their baby during postpartum depression? I just wonder - when a man like you tries to throw his own baby from a balcony, could that be some sort of postpartum reaction in men? Maybe you were confused, hormonally imbalanced…”

“I wasn’t trying to throw my baby!” he cut her off angrily. “I was showing her the view. I wanted her to see the city that would be under her feet when she grew up and became successful like her father.”

“Of course. As I said, cameras can make mistakes. But how come you weren’t confused about the whole fatherhood thing?” Christine continued.

“Why would I be confused? Every fool raises a child these days. Could I ever fail?” he replied.

“Even the best fathers can feel confused sometimes. One of the cameras recorded you telling her you wished she had never been born. Maybe it was depression speaking.”

“Well, how would you feel?!” Marco yelled. “When she was born, I didn’t exist for Ivy anymore. She didn’t love me anymore. Everything was about the baby. I was supposed to become just a machine working around the baby and providing for it. Actually, the baby was just an excuse. It was Ivy who was always hungry for more and more money. After all, do you think I entered that marriage broke? My father was rich. I got her the job she wanted. And now I’m the bad guy?”

“I understand,” Christine said calmly. “She just wasn’t the right person for you.”

Christine knew this was all a lie - a nicely organized confabulation built around the weak skeleton of factual truth, but essentially a pile of nonsense. He didn’t love the child. The only thing she was truly curious about was why. She wondered what lay behind the mess he had made of his family.

“Ivy never took care of me,” he confessed. “She became like the others - so small, so pathetic, so ordinary. And at the same time, so hungry for money and sex. I felt like she wanted to suck every second of my precious time. I think she was envious. She wanted to sabotage my contribution to science. I even doubt I ever had erectile dysfunction. I just couldn’t do it with her. She wasn’t pretty anymore, and besides, she wanted to ruin my life. Of course I couldn’t sleep with her! I have a soul - how can I be with someone who hates me?”

“Some people can separate sex from love,” Christine said calmly.

“And some can’t!” he yelled.

“Of course, Marco, don’t be upset. I understand. Just tell me - why were you chatting with other women, seeing them, and having short affairs?”

“Wouldn’t every man do the same in such an empty, loveless marriage?” he replied, putting on the “sad boy” expression again.

“I understand. It wasn’t my goal to torture you with this conversation. Just tell me one more thing: on a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate the severity of your depression?” Christine asked.

“Seven, I’d say. I felt deceived. I felt like Ivy sold me an illusion. I should’ve chosen the better one. But it’s her lies… all her lies…” he whined.

“On a scale from one to ten, I’d say your depression was eleven,” Christine said calmly. She wasn’t sure whether she was using the right strategy, but intuitively she felt that this slightly provocative attitude might secure his consent to the experiment.

“Possible,” he replied coolly. “All great minds suffer. So, are we done? I don’t want to be rude, but I’m a busy man. And I feel like this is leading nowhere.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t dare sabotage your important achievements,” Christine answered.

He stood up and slowly walked toward the door. He turned the knob.

The door was locked.

He stiffened.

“What is this?!” he demanded.

“The Institute locks automatically if one of the patients becomes unstable. Someone here is probably having a breakdown or a dangerous tantrum. Please, have a seat. I’m sure it will be unlocked in no time,” she said calmly.

“You people are crazy,” he snapped. “I don’t have time for these games.”

“Another Orphenatia tea?” she asked politely.

Marco accepted the tea and lit a cigarette.

“And what about your third depressive episode?” she asked casually.

“Oh, come on! I don’t want to talk about this anymore. It’s just some silly past. Will you unlock this ridiculous building already?” He was beginning to lose control.

“You don’t have to talk if you don’t want to. We can just sit in silence. But my phone alarm suggests this might remain locked for over an hour.”

“Ah, all right! What about the third episode?! Times were tough. Everyone was depressed. So what about it?” He finally exploded. “I’m still depressed - is that what you wanted to hear? You destroyed me! I hate you people. Bloody commies. The old times were better for me - is that what you wanted to hear? I was someone! Now every dirty peasant can be educated. You’re printing new elites like a daily newspaper. But they’re all proles - and they will never be me!”

“I understand. But, Marco, the Institute is not the government. We’re not printing anything. We’re just making sure…”

“Yes, yes, blah, blah. Enough of this joke! What do you want from me?” His eyes turned red, and his pupils dilated so much that he almost looked like a wounded animal.

“Okay, Marco, did you know that your previous doctor, Helen, gave you a diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder - malignant type, sadistic subtype?”

“I didn’t know,” he lied. “So what? It might be false. It might be a mistake. It means nothing.”

“You’re correct. It might be nothing. It might be a mistake. It might be an inconvenient truth. Whatever it is - we need diagnosed individuals for an experiment. We are preparing a study that will last at least a year. You can voluntarily participate.

“And you would earn a lot of money from it. We offer five hundred thousand dollars just for participation, regardless of the result. Think about it, Marco - that money could give you your old life back,” Christine explained.

“This makes absolutely no sense,” he said, surprised. “So we’re not equal after all? The Institute wants to make me rich just for participating in some kind of questionnaire? Where’s the catch?”

In a matter of seconds, Marco forgot his anger. He wanted the money badly. He imagined all the ways he could spend it: luxurious travel with young women, a new high-end apartment, a year off from the work he only pretended to enjoy, maybe a brand-new car, designer clothing… the possibilities were endless.

“The catch is - you will have to stay here. Isolated from everyone. You will get a computer to work on, but no people to chat with. No one to talk to except me, once every two weeks. All the nurses you interact with will be either robots or deaf-mute. After some time, you might receive a simple job involving work with animals. But no people. That’s the difficult part,” Christine explained.

“But I can still work on a computer? Write? Publish?” he asked.

“Absolutely. You can watch films and shows, play games, work out, drink coffee or Orphenatia on a pleasant balcony, take walks through the park. This is not a prison. Just isolation from people.”

“Sounds too good to be true. All that money… I think you’re trying to fool me somehow,” he laughed.

“You don’t have to decide right away,” Christine said. “I’m in this office every Wednesday. You can come and see me anytime. By the way, the Institute has just been unlocked. You may leave and continue with your obligations.”

“It sounds so tempting to be your secret visitor every week,” he flirted again, even more directly than before, trying to break her defenses. “I think this offer is too good to skip. Half a million dollars, my dear.”

“Should I take this as a ‘yes’?” Christine asked.

“I’ll read the contract in the hall now, of course. You won’t get my blank signature. But count it as a yes. And tell me, dear, is the offer for another cup of Orphenatia still on?” he smiled.

He happily walked out into the hall to read the details, although it was already obvious that he had agreed to Christine’s proposition. And, of course, he was already making plans to outsmart them all.

Chapter 6

Terms and Conditions

July 7th, 2064
Wednesday

“My name is Peter,” Peter said, shaking Marco’s hand.

Marco took his hand with faint disgust. It was a handshake between silent rivals. One of them was strong, silent, and honest; the other overt, open, and delusional. Yet anyone watching from the side would have the impression that Marco was the better man - more modest, kinder, the finer gentleman. It seemed that Marco Po possessed some kind of magical influence over the eyes of the beholder.

Christine stood aside, thinking about the bewitched eyes of the beholder, and giggled inwardly, imagining what would happen if that beholder saw the passionate embrace of Marco and the hairy anus of Miss Andrea.

“Marco. Nice to meet you,” he said.

“Did you read the contract?” Peter went straight to the point.

“I’ve read and signed it,” Marco answered.

“That was fast,” Peter said, surprised. “I thought you might want to look around and think about it…”

“I’d like you to show me around, doctor. Though there’s nothing to think about. I’m staying. Your offer is generous, and I’m pleased to help science in every possible way,” Marco said confidently.

“Are you already planning how to spend your money? If the experiment extends beyond the deadline, you might earn up to a million.”

“Of course, the money won’t be wasted in my hands. I’m thinking about charity, maybe even opening a university. I’ll surely spend some to have fun - I’m just a man, after all. But the money is not the main reason I agreed to be part of this little experiment of yours. First of all, I could use

a year off. Second, I deeply hope this will stop you from digging up every single video from my past and using it to paint me as some kind of serial killer. It's ridiculous. All those silly accusations of malignant narcissism… I mean, doc, come on," Marco smiled.

"Understandable," Peter replied professionally. "Nobody wants to be painted as the devil in the immortal words of history. But keep in mind that isolation is a heavy burden. It's somewhat like a prison in a hotel room. And when the sun goes down, it's just walls full of mirrors - and a soul completely alone."

"Oh, doc, you should be a poet," Marco said.

"Now, shall we?" Peter asked, letting Christine lead the way. He followed behind, side by side with Marco.

"This is your room," Christine said. "It has everything you need - and more. A computer to work on, a shower, a beautiful balcony with a view, a door leading to the park where you can jog or take a walk. You even have your own private gym."

"Thank you," Marco replied. "But I would prefer to receive the instructions from a real doctor."

"Christine is an expert in the field," Peter passionately defended his colleague.

"Oh…" Christine whispered calmly, feeling the humiliation like the sting of a vicious bee. "I agree with the suggestion. Let the doctor take over. Will you, doc?"

"Okay, well…" Peter mumbled. "You will have full comfort. You can ring for room service, and robots will bring you food. You can press this button for medical assistance, and one of our nurses will gladly assist you."

"Human or robot nurses?" Marco asked.

“Our primary nurses are human, but they are all deaf, mute, and lesbian. It prevents narcissists from seduction attempts. They are also military-trained and cannot be manipulated into pity or casual conversation. They are available to provide urgent care, a sedative, or an anti-dissociative infusion. Or simply a sleeping pill. If you feel distressed, press this button.”

“I’m never distressed,” Marco lied. “I can be tired or slightly nervous, but okay - it’s useful to know all this.”

“Now, pay attention to the red door. After a few months, if you successfully adapt to this life in solitude, you will be allowed through that door and assigned simple tasks for four hours on weekdays.”

“Sounds more bearable than my regular job,” Marco smiled politely.

“Of course, things can go off track sometimes. So first of all, you will receive this poly-bracelet. Under no circumstances are you allowed to remove it. It functions as a polygraph. It will flash green when you tell the truth and red when you lie. In addition, it monitors your mood as precisely as possible. If your emotional state becomes dramatically unstable or aggressive, our central system will be alerted. Depending on the situation, a nurse may administer medication - but not always. Sometimes we will consider the behavior part of the therapeutic process and allow it to unfold.”

“Now, please, your wrist.”

Marco extended his wrist, and Peter secured the bracelet in place.

“Oh, this is rather interesting,” Marco smiled.

“There is more,” the doctor continued. “We use one rather bizarre technique. Post-psychoanalytics retained this method as an active practice. It might feel a bit unpleasant, but it is considered necessary. It’s the so-called ‘Robotic Mother Voice,’ or RMV.

“RMV is installed above your bed and imitates the voice of a caring mother. The goal of RMV is to calm you without medication. If your poly-

bracelet detects deep sadness, suicidal thoughts, or irrational fear, you will hear the RMV. It will be a female voice telling you how much she loves you, how proud she is of you, and what a great job you did that day in the workroom or in therapy. In short, it will endlessly repeat supportive sentences whenever it detects that you need them. RMV might sound banal, but it works with regular patients," Peter explained.

"You're the doctor - you know," Marco said sarcastically. "But I must admit, it's funny."

"Indeed, some methods may seem rather silly."

"Is that everything?" Marco asked. "I'm kind of eager to bring my things here, enjoy this luxurious apartment with a private park and swimming pool, and eventually earn half a million for it."

"Well, it's not that simple," Peter replied. "You must understand that speaking to no living being for a year can feel like severe punishment. It's prison-like. You will have no global web access. You are not allowed to chat or make phone calls. No Epal, no deep web, nothing. Absolutely zero contact. Do you understand?"

"That's severe…" Marco frowned. "It could drive a sane man mad."

"Which is why you will have a session with your personal therapist every second week. It will function somewhat like a teacher-student relationship, if you understand. It will not be a dynamic between two equal adults. It is not a free-speech space. The goal of the sessions is for you to learn the precise emotional and intentional meaning of words. I won't lie to you - at times, you may feel like a fool playing this role. You will receive tasks: drawing, painting, perhaps writing, maybe even music.

"And since Christine will be your therapist, I don't believe she will be overly strict with you. Christine is a woman of very specific and, I dare say, a genius mind."

Peter smiled warmly.

Marco, however, seemed less amused.

“I expected a real doctor,” he said.

“You got an expert,” Peter replied.

“A second-order psychologist? An expert with just a course?”

“I’ll tell you a secret that history knows very well: all the best ones are self-taught.”

“If that’s what you want to believe,” Marco rolled his eyes.

Christine remained silent. It wasn’t the first time she had been humiliated like this. She had stopped counting long ago. She decided the remark wasn’t worth a tear, nor shame, nor retreat. She stood there like a machine, fully prepared to accept her role, even if she wasn’t appreciated.

“Oh… and one more important thing,” Peter added. “Christine will have a special protective bubble around her body during your sessions - just in case.”

“You think I’m violent?” Marco frowned again.

“It’s just a standard procedure. Precautions. Nothing personal.”

“No offense, lovely lady…” Marco turned to Christine, addressing her directly despite having ignored her only minutes earlier. “You are impressive in a way, but I expected a real doctor. Well, not very young - just impressive.”

“I appreciate your willingness to express your expectations,” she replied calmly. “But I’m afraid the position of teacher-supervisor is not one that a medical doctor can hold. Those are simply the rules. Doctors are needed elsewhere.”

She smiled.

“Well, all right. There’s no reason for me to refuse being part of this experiment. If nothing else, it could be fun. And you shrinks and the Securital Order Agency will finally stop calling me once this is over. You’ll stop asking questions based on some outdated test that some no-last-name doctor, Helen, performed ages ago. I’m just a guy with CPTSD, like all of you. Eventually, you’ll realize you’ve wasted your money. And now, excuse me, ladies and gentlemen - I need to bring my things and move into your luxurious prison, if for no other reason than to prove my point,” Marco said, filled with excitement and confidence, as if he already had a plan to outsmart the system.

By evening, Marco had moved in. The apartment at the Institute became his home.

Peter sat in the control room, watching Marco’s workout routine through the camera while holding a glass of wine. Christine was there as well, drinking Orphenatia tea. She felt slightly sad, a little like a loser, but she kept herself under perfect control.

“I’m proud of you,” Peter said. “You’ll be perfect for this. You’ll confuse him until he’s no longer able to control his deepest quirks and pain. And then we’ll know. He will either break and resurrect - cured - or… well, I don’t want to think about any negative outcome.”

“Oh… Peter… what if I fail?”

“Then we’ll try again.”

“We will never again find someone willing to fund us,” she said quietly.

“Well, if we fail, we’ll patiently wait for another chance. Until then, we’ll work hard and simply enjoy the process. What else is life about?” he smiled and poured them both a glass of wine, sweetening the floral scent of Orphenatia that slowly filled the room with a strange sense of peace and beauty.

Chapter 7

The Fire Inside

July 12th, 2064
Monday

It had been five days since Marco Po was locked inside his luxurious apartment.

At first, he worked out a lot. Peter was watching him through the hidden camera in Christine's office. Christine sat across from him, sipping Orphenatia and smoking. It was already evening - peaceful and boring.

"It's going fine so far," Peter said.

"Maybe it was a mistake, after all," she shrugged.

"Although we have no idea what's going on inside his head. The poly-bracelet shows fear and distress from time to time."

"Well, being isolated isn't easy. Maybe we got the wrong guy. Half a million going to waste, huh?" Something about that possibility made Christine quietly happy, though she kept her face serious and mechanical.

"Well, nothing unusual now. He's taking a shower and going to sleep. I guess we can go home and leave the cameras recording."

"Sure. Whatever happens, we'll check it tomorrow," Christine concluded. "But I must admit, Pete, this job doesn't feel heavy at all. I could spend the night here. I'm finally satisfied with at least one aspect of my life."

"I'm glad you're feeling better, dear. If you feel depressed at any time, just tell me - the Institute will send you on a long seaside holiday."

"I'm not that critical," she smiled. "It's just… sometimes…"

She didn't want to revisit a conversation they had already had too many times. Neither CPTSD nor depression simply disappears as if nothing

ever happened. You can't become the blank sheet of paper you once were at eighteen, standing on the doorstep of mistakes and guilt that would forever change your personality.

Peter was in a good mood, and she didn't want to spoil it.

She removed her top uniform and headed home. Peter stepped out right after her.

Meanwhile, Marco lay in bed, staring at the ceiling.

He tried to amuse himself with his phone, but without contacts, without social networks or chats, it was useless. That night, he couldn't even focus on boring brainteaser games. He thought that maybe playing a simulation game with artificial characters might help him sleep - but unexpectedly his blood began to boil, and old memories attacked him mercilessly.

He felt deep anger and restlessness, without knowing exactly where it came from.

He needed people. He needed to mold emotions on their faces as if they were made of clay. Most of all, he needed the sense of power over them.

Without it, everything felt tense - and unbearably dull at the same time.

After a while, and two cups of Orphenatia, he managed to fall asleep. But it didn't last long. The peace, the silence, the unnatural whisper of darkness around him made him inexplicably uncomfortable. He felt as if he were back in a womb.

He sat on the edge of the bed and tried to smoke. The boredom, the anger, the burning disturbance inside his head became unbearable. He tried to break the door by throwing the full weight of his body against it. No success. Then he tried to fight the feeling by jumping rope, staring at his impressive body in the mirror. That failed too.

So he lay down again, crying at first - then shaking as if he were having an epileptic seizure. In a word, he felt horror. Horror rising from the

inside of a forgotten child. He sensed imaginary pliers squeezing his chest.

And then he was out of his body.

He stood on the ceiling, looking down at his abandoned form, and spoke to it:

“Does it feel like someone is tearing off your hand? Amputated without anesthesia. You tried to see yourself in the mirror, but there was no reflection. The silence of this empty apartment reminds you of that place after she left. You impulsively sold your apartment after the divorce, and now this luxury prison cell brings it all back.

“And that is not all. It reminds you of your parents’ house - the house of discipline, terror, and silent tears. The light burns like it’s frying a starving vampire. You sold everything, just to spend the money on light drugs, booze, and ladies of the night. And it didn’t matter that some of the ladies were boys or men.

“But with men, it was easier, wasn’t it? You didn’t hate them. You could empty yourself without fear that someone might actually enjoy it. A man - whether he enjoys it or not - it’s like a little boys’ game of soccer after school. But female joy… oh, you hate it. Not even admiration helps. You want fear, disappointment, and pain in women’s eyes.

“You can’t come without it, can you, my friend?”

You went through a period when you abused heavy, expensive wine. But it was short. Alcohol was never really your thing. Sometimes, when boredom became unbearable, you took ecstasy or LSD and went to rave parties until the kids could no longer tolerate your aging face jumping among them like an infantile relic.

Then you started crawling through underground bars with damp ceilings that smelled of weed, tobacco, and old furniture. You attended book nights, even though you weren’t particularly interested in reading. You pretended you had read Lady Chatterley’s Lover and Philip Roth just to seem unique and special to women - all women, any woman.

You asked for sex and gave no passion.

Your flaccid body refused to obey you. It was either useless or mechanical, trying to find a trace of pleasure in all those limp, ordinary bodies, while your sadism stood hungry and disappointed. They climaxed, again and again - and you hated it. They kept coming back for more, and it felt like a burden, because they were so focused on themselves instead of you. They wanted to prove something. They wanted to prove they could seduce you. But no passion ever rose from your rusted chest.

They meant nothing.

You flirted with men, too. You would have flirted with a pig if it could have filled the emptiness inside you. But it was all labor without reward. Then you rejected them. You enjoyed the sweet salt of disappointment in their eyes, filling your own hollowness with their sadness and frustration.

And when the hour of the wolf ticked its final minute, the unbridled mirror showed you a black hole of eternal hell. You could hear a promise of slow, anonymous death whispering from the other side of the glass. Dawn would rise, and the room would smell of sulfur, ammonia, and stale sweat.

But every new day gave birth to a new Marco.

Friday's Marco was completely different from Saturday's. His mood, his face, his attitudes, his opinions, his choices - even his soul - belonged to another man. Living only in the present moment set you free. Today you loved what you hated yesterday. You shed yesterday like a snake sheds its skin.

You became someone new.

Every morning, a new bird. Every night, ash.

Again and again - forgetting life with ease, inventing a new one. Painful or liberating, unstable and dramatic - but in the end, strangely entertaining.

As he separated from his weakened body, his poly-bracelet began to beep, flashing orange. It detected stress, fear, and panic.

A nurse entered the apartment and prepared a syringe, getting ready to inject a sedative. Marco saw his opportunity. He began to squirm and whimper softly. The nurse ignored him.

He grabbed her hand and looked deep into her eyes, projecting terror, pleading for mercy, craving love. With his eyebrows arched in pain, playing the victim, he exposed as much of his tense muscles and naked skin as possible, acting like a seductive damsel in distress.

The experienced nurse ignored him.

She inserted the needle into his arm, administered the sedative, and left.

He sulked.

His charm had failed him.

The medication worked quickly. He took a short nap and woke up with another cunning plan.

Fine. He couldn't play with the nurse. The nurse wouldn't make this tragic holiday easier for him.

Instead, he would play with the psychologist.

What was her name again? Oh, Christine.

If the circumstances were different, that woman would come crawling to his doorstep, begging for his attention. She would stare at him as if he were a god. To her, he would be a god. She would beg for his touch - and worst of all, it would arouse her.

And every time he pushed her away, her thighs would grow warm with desire, because she would know that, regardless of any New Order or any career she had been granted, she was simply not good enough for him.

Not as beautiful. Not as intelligent. Not as educated.

She was merely a product of the New Order's mercy.

And after all, she should be grateful - to him and to the Order. There had been war. There had been pain. There was no love - so what? They, the Alphas, had led people like her through fire and burning coal. Alphas had made them stronger. Alphas believed they could endure pain and become steel.

Alphas were benefactors, misunderstood by the ungrateful.

He would give her the red pill. He would give her the poisonous apple of knowledge. He would give her everything he was.

Those who refused simply chose to remain small worms, never daring to become bloody butterflies.

And to him, it didn't matter.

He was losing nothing.

She - oh, she would be on her knees, feeling the thunder. Inevitable. She would leave. But after me, she would choke on the bitter taste of truth. While she lay in bed with just another weak, ordinary man, the memory of me would remain in her thorn-ridden chest forever.

I never disappear. I never fade.

"Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds."

The things Marco whispered to himself didn't calm him. The sedative made him drowsy, but anger kept breaking through his polished façade. He sat down at the computer and launched CombatAsh. He chose a character, named him Zews, and selected an army knife as his weapon.

He approached the first female character in the game and initiated dialogue.

“Where are you headed, soldier?” asked the pixelated blonde.

“To find the Holy Grail and bring it to you, my fair lady,” his character replied.

“There is a village up the hill, soldier,” she answered, repeating the standard scripted line.

“Is that where I can find the Holy Grail?” Zews asked.

“There is a village up the hill, soldier.”

“The fair lady could offer me some fine wine and mushrooms,” he tried again.

“There is a village up the hill, soldier.”

The blonde fell into an infinite loop. She was not programmed for depth.

Marco found her boring.

Zews drew the knife and slaughtered her. Her scream was sharp and disturbingly vivid - almost lifelike. The sound settled something inside him.

Marco felt slightly calmer.

He shut down the computer and returned to bed, where sleep finally claimed him.

Chapter 8

The First Session

July 21st, 2064
Wednesday

During his second week at the Institute, Marco Po attended his first session with Christine.

He was surprisingly calm. If Christine hadn't seen the videos in which Marco had demolished parts of the apartment, breaking objects in silent rage, she would never have believed he was the same person. A gentle smile rested on his face as he sat down opposite her.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Much better. I'm getting used to solitude."

As soon as he said that, his bracelet flashed red.

He was lying.

Christine ignored the bracelet.

"There is one thing…" he continued. "There was a moment when I got upset and felt as if I wasn't present in my own body. Isn't that dangerous? Doesn't that raise ethical concerns about your experiment?"

"It's depersonalization. We expected such a reaction. You might even experience brief psychotic episodes. Don't worry," she replied calmly.

He wasn't worried.

He was trying to use the episode to stop the experiment. Solitude was driving him mad. He did not exist without other people. And for the first time in his life, he was honestly and deeply unsettled.

"Look, Christine," he leaned forward slightly, softening his voice. "You are an extraordinary and beautiful woman. I cannot understand how

someone like you - educated, intelligent, attractive as hell - chose to be part of this. This is isolation. It's inhuman. It's ungrounded. It has no scientific goal. And I, as a PhD, must say this process is non-scientific. Someone as smart as you should understand the consequences. This is torture."

He was trying to manipulate her.

The moment he said "extraordinary" and "beautiful," his bracelet flashed red again.

It was a lie.

He didn't mean a word of it.

It hurt her - briefly - but she remained composed, cold, professional.

"I assure you that this experiment has been approved by the Government Institute for Science and Psychology," Christine replied evenly. "Try to accept the circumstances and see where they might lead you."

"Look, are you sure someone at the Government Institute isn't jealous of me? They probably consider me a better scientist than any of them could ever be, and they want to eliminate me. This is a conspiracy. Have you ever thought of that? Can't you see it?" he spoke with intense conviction.

His poly-bracelet showed no light this time.

Which meant he might actually believe what he was saying.

It was as if he could no longer find stability in his narcissism, so he was slowly sliding into paranoia.

Christine grew concerned.

She genuinely wanted him to heal. Curing people like him would mean a significantly better world - a world better than anyone had dared to imagine. And even if such a transformation were impossible on a global

scale, she still wanted him to heal. For the sake of passion, if nothing else. After a life of struggle, she felt the world owed her at least this small reward.

But thinking like that was useless.

He seemed like a lost case.

Still, it was her duty not to give up.

“Let’s begin today’s lesson,” she said with a controlled smile. “Since you consider me some sort of personal teacher, today we are going to draw.”

“Draw?” he looked surprised.

“Yes. I want you to draw something.”

“With crayons? Like a retarded person?” Marco asked with contempt.

He took a deep breath and grabbed a pen. He drew a straight line across the board. Then another one. Both were mathematically precise - flat and perfect.

Then his hand began to shake.

The third line he attempted was distorted. He clenched his teeth and started shaking his leg. As the tremor worsened, he suddenly flipped the table and hurled the pen. The table crashed into the wall, while the pen bounced off the invisible shield surrounding Christine.

His face turned gray.

“You stupid bitch,” he whispered. “You pathetic, cock-craving, non-Aryan bitch. I will piss on your grave.”

He stood up and shoved the table again. It hit the protective shield around Christine, rebounded, and struck him in the forehead. Security rushed into the office as blood streamed from his temple.

He began to cry.

“Why are you so pathetic? Why can’t you accept that someone is simply better than you? Better at everything - more gifted, more handsome, just smarter, just bloody better at everything? Damn you!” he screamed.

As soon as security dragged him away, Christine felt a wave of relief.

She pulled a cup of Orphenatia tea from the cabinet - already prepared - and opened the window. The breeze calmed her.

This will be hard, she thought. This man… this will be a hell of a task.

Besides being hard, it was probably impossible.

As she grew sad, imagining the failure of the entire experiment - the failure that could have launched her name into history - she barely noticed the new feeling forming inside her.

She began to enjoy his suffering.

Even though she desired his body - even when he smelled of mild summer sweat and stale morning breath - deep inside, Christine hated Marco.

She hated him for believing he was superior to her.

And that hatred planted tiny seeds of sadism in her soul.

Unmistakably, she wanted to have sex with him. But at that moment, more than the sex itself, she wanted him to suffer. It wasn’t very professional, and she was aware of that - but she felt it anyway.

She enjoyed the tears she had just seen.

She hadn’t felt that kind of satisfaction since her former employers, who had tormented her for years, were sent to prison. It seemed as if his malignancy were contagious. For a second, she felt herself burning in the same hell he had been born into - and that hell, sweet in that intoxicating moment, might conceal something far darker beneath it.

“Fuck you!” she suddenly shouted, throwing the pen across the office. “I am a good person. I am not like you. I am smart and pretty and educated, you bloody bastard! I will piss on your grave!”

She spoke without regret. Without empathy.

It took a great deal of tobacco and Orphenatia to calm herself and return to her former composure. But something inside her had shifted. A tiny seed of determination, selfishness, and hardness had been planted in the soil of kindness she had kept watered for so many years.

Christine was no saint.

And perhaps that wasn’t such a tragedy.

Chapter 9

The Land of Blood and Sugar

August 28th, 2064
Saturday

It was ten p.m., and the weather was still hot. The cloudless night smelled of summer flowers, fresh sweat, and heavy perfume. Christine was restless. She sat in her room, turning the air conditioner on and off, smoking one cigarette after another.

For the first time in a while, she felt a strong desire to go out.

She craved a glass of cold, dark wine. A bar with loud Irish punk. A wild crowd cooled by bursts of evaporating water spray. It was hard for her to concentrate on work. Surrounded by mini-discs containing records of Marco Po's life in isolation, she knew she should review them.

But the sweet summer night was tempting.

Her career was her life. She had no other. On the other hand, Marco Po - and his fake charm - had awakened a long-forgotten passion in her body. She didn't want to watch all the footage of him alone, miserable, and weak as he truly was.

So she decided to do three things.

First, she would complete some of her work. She would search for additional data about Marco on the Locked Net - a restricted professional network containing non-public records.

Some of that data might prove interesting.

Second, she would call her colleague Si and ask about Marco's recent progress.

And finally, instead of wasting the rest of the evening on this exhausting and pointless task, she would go to a bar, drink wine, and find a handsome stranger to take home.

Sex. Screwing. Fucking. The sweet scent of a freshly showered body. The fragrance of illusion. A silent stranger who could be anything and anyone. A smart, confident man who would stand straight and look her in the eyes, allowing her to build fantasies around him. A fairy tale she would tell herself in order to reach the best orgasm she'd had in ages.

Or, at the very least, an ordinary stranger in a clean shirt - someone with all his teeth and who didn't smell like piss-soaked pants and unwashed socks.

Task number one:

Ask AI to access the Locked Net and search for Marco's origins.

The AI returned the following:

"Po is a surname derived from the well-known Finrach family name Poich. The Finracs were ancient Roman road keepers - elite officers who settled territories now known as Eastern Europe. Most Finracs lived in the states of Arnea, Acalla, and Beshelina.

The Finracs maintained close trade and cooperation with the Apryery tribe from northern Europe, renowned for their skills in commerce and marketing. The Finracs adopted the Apryery religion while serving shared economic and geopolitical goals.

After the Slavs won World War II, the Apryery tribe relocated to northern Europe. The Poich family (see also Linich, Mayerich, Lanich, etc.) removed the suffix '-ich' from their surname to sound more Slavic. Thus, prominent families became known simply as Po, Lan, Mayer, and so on.

Since Slavic dominance was short-lived, the Finracs never severed their cooperation with the Apryerys. The Apryerys enabled the Finracs to dominate Arnea, Acalla, and Beshelina. In those states, up to 90% of successful businessmen, professors, traders, and doctors were Finracs. Only about 10% were Arneans, Acallans, or Beshelinas - most of whom were poor and unable to afford elite education.

Arneans, Acallans, and Beshelinas lived as a kind of modern colonial underclass. Only a small number achieved higher education or respectable employment. Many Arneans were self-taught, and even when they obtained degrees or titles, they remained servants to the Finracs.

Unlike the Finracs, Arneans, Acallans, and Beshelinas - with few wealthy exceptions - did not possess surnames implying noble lineage. Instead of surnames, they were assigned numbers."

Christine felt a surge of anger - and envy.

She was Arnean. The servant class. And now she finally knew for certain: no intelligence, no education, no hard work, no academic success - not even French beauty (and Christine had possessed all that when she was young) - could erase her origin.

Blood is blood.

There is blood destined to inherit the throne - and blood meant to be spilled and sacrificed to the gods.

She longed to ask the Apryerys why. She wanted to know what she had done wrong. Why she had never been given a teacher to explain why her hard work wasn't enough. How can a person stay motivated to fight and strive if you constantly treat them as less than human?

She wanted to forget. To drink.

She wanted music and joy.

They could ban many things, but they could never ban singing and dancing with Gypsies under the night sky - beneath stars that shine for everyone, regardless of the color of their blood.

Tonight, I will sing and dance and fuck, she thought.

Task number two:

Call colleague Si.

Si answered instantly.

“Si, I’m curious about the progress of experiment number 1666,” Christine said.

“Oh, Chris…” Si replied. “Peter told me yesterday that you’d probably call me on your day off. He truly admires you, you know. He wanted you to rest. The Old World is over. This is no longer the Old World Order. I know it’s not easy, but try to let go of the injustice that was inflicted worldwide.”

“I won’t be working tonight, dear,” Christine said. “I just wanted an update.”

“All right, let me check… your narcissist… it was that PhD - Darco? Farco?”

“Marco,” Christine corrected her.

“Oh yes, Marco Po… oh dear God…” Si exhaled. “All day long he’s demolishing the room, screaming to be released. We’ve replaced his furniture three times already. Classic malignant narcissist with strong sadistic elements. He prefers emotional sadism rather than physical. Because he’s alone, he’s showing intense psychopathic aggression. Every time he manages to interact with a human, he tries to manipulate them.

“There’s no one to control, no one to bully, no one to admire him… so he’s in a kind of mental hell. He wrote on the wall that he can’t see his reflection in the mirror. Of course, he broke the mirror because ‘it wasn’t adequate and didn’t comply.’ They had to stitch him up. Seven stitches and several smaller cuts.

“As you can see, psychotic elements are already emerging. The guy is mad as a March Hare. It’s too early for a prognosis, but his chances are minimal. Peter said we’d be lucky if we manage to downgrade him to borderline with lifelong antipsychotic therapy.”

“Are you sure he won’t escape? Or hurt himself? If the diagnosis is wrong, he might attempt suicide in isolation,” Christine asked quietly.

“No way, Christine. He can’t escape. Security is airtight. Hurt himself? Not a fucking chance. After watching some of the videos, I started to doubt he even has a soul. He is what he is.”

“As voters used to say back in our days: you don’t need a soul if you have a PhD.”

“Yes, I remember how silly people were. Voting for ‘experts’ while having no idea what science actually is. That’s why most of the narcissists in our experiment are former politicians,” Si said. “But darling, don’t be bitter. You can’t punish yourself forever for everything that happened to the world. And remember - it has no name. It is not Marco Po. It is experiment number 1666. They gave us numbers to exploit us, to torture us, to kill us slowly and painfully. We gave them numbers to try to cure them. We gave them rooms, comfort, exercise, medical care. We are not the bad guys. Vampires like him are bad for the world.”

“I guess my misfortune comes from finding vampires quite sexy,” Chris said cynically.

“Well, that’s your trauma speaking. Still, you’re not such a sinner. Most of humanity once believed the devil was a successful businessman. The devil was their idol. You have the right to find a bad person sexy sometimes. Men do it all the time,” Si replied.

“If you say so. I guess I can run away from everything, dear Si - except my own guilt,” Christine answered.

“Try not to think about the old world. Enjoy your evening and don’t worry. Nothing will happen to him. And if something does happen by some miracle… no one would feel sorry.”

“Okay. Yes, yes…” Christine mumbled. “Thank you, Si. I’m done for today.”

Task number three:
Enjoy the night.

For Christine, this was the hardest task of all - to relax.

She took a cold shower and put lemon-scented lotion all over her body. Then she turned on some music, mostly songs she had loved as a young girl, songs that used to bring her joy and sadness at the same time. Black Velvet played softly, singing about that little boy's smile while she applied black eyeliner to her lids. The dark smoke around her eyes brought back the femme fatale look she once had. Nude lipstick made her look younger, and when she let her long brown hair fall freely over her shoulders, the effect was mesmerizing.

After drinking a glass of Merlot and putting on a light summer dress, she resembled a French actress from an old perfume commercial. This version of her - though far from ideal, thin, or modern - usually awakened something primal and nostalgic in men. But she had abandoned that look long ago. She had been wrapped instead in a cloud of darkness - sadness born of injustice, anger, and shameful guilt.

After another glass of wine, she began to forget. The tension slowly dissolved. Mild dizziness from the alcohol and the sweet mint cigarette spread through her body. She waited for the wine to strike harder and bring the blessing of oblivion.

Then she turned on the computer and logged into brutalXXX. She watched a few hardcore videos until her thighs felt warm and damp. She was prepared. Even the dumbest man, she thought, wouldn't fail to please her tonight. She was relaxed, half-drunk, aroused, and ready.

She called a cab and went to Q Pub.

Q Pub was a charming place for the middle-aged lost generation that still wanted to feel alive. They played classic rock 'n' roll - music so ancient it made customers feel less old. The place smelled of mint shampoo, tobacco, and warm beer.

She ordered a glass of dark wine.

Her stomach tightened slightly when she saw a tall man in his early forties, thick hair touched with gray. He looked like Marco Po - only slimmer. A mix of fear and passion rushed through her, and she stared at him like an insecure teenager. But his eyes never met hers. He was

focused on his male companion and did not seem to notice Christine at all. She was mature enough to understand immediately.

Scanning the swaying, drunken crowd, she noticed a pair of green eyes beneath thick brown brows studying her. A burly bald man was looking directly at her. He liked her French beauty, even though she was curvier and he appeared more conventionally attractive than she was. She gave him a friendly smile.

But as soon as he turned his head to the side, she saw a woman take his hand. He was taken.

She kept scanning while the wine gradually took over. Hungry for beauty, she felt almost feral in her restlessness. But more than anything, she wanted to forget Marco Po.

Marco doesn't exist, she told herself. He never existed anywhere except in my imagination. He is an illusion. A moral freak. A parasite.

Marco Po is nothing but a patient in an asylum for the insane.

Time was running wild. The alcohol was strong. The crowd was dispersing. People met and parted, drugged and drunk, kissed and quarreled. But she was somewhere else - estranged. An outsider. Everything seemed to be happening far away from her mind and soul.

Her crotch was wet, but her heart was a wasteland.

Finally, one Arnean man approached her. His cheeks were broad, his lips small and thin. Judging by the shape of his wide head, she instantly knew he was Arnean. Everything that made Arnean women beautiful - wide cheeks, childish eyes, generous hips - made Arnean men look soft and slightly feminine. She didn't really like him, but he was quiet.

His name was Alex.

She hoped this man would compensate for his modest appearance with a brilliant mind.

They kissed for a while, and then she took him to her place. He was eager to undress. Beneath a layer of modest chest hair and a round stomach, she noticed he was well endowed. His body carried no particular scent except the light perfume he was wearing. His gaze seemed empty, and his lips were tasteless.

Christine was not impressed.

He slightly parted his soft lips and used his teeth to tear open the condom wrapper.

"Can we do it without a condom?" he asked.

"You know, by asking whether you can give me a child or a collection of itchy, burning diseases, you're really driving me wild with passion," she replied sarcastically.

"What?" he looked confused. He didn't understand a word. He was dumb. And stupidity was something that instantly cooled her down.

"Nothing," she answered.

"So, can we do it without?"

"No!"

"Okay," he said calmly and rolled the condom over his thick, pale shaft, dotted with thin veins.

His fingers were cold. His touch was gentle when it was supposed to be rough, and rough when it was supposed to be gentle. There was nothing exciting about sex with a stranger, nothing exciting about being in bed with someone unfamiliar with your desires.

Except when you are Christine and meet such people in an asylum for the mentally ill.

She thought that the strangers in bars were, at best, a waste of perfectly good testosterone. That night, Chris hated her desires and her kinks. And even more than that, she hated her bad decisions.

Alex entered her roughly. His size was uncomfortable. When she adjusted and the act became bearable, the repetitive movement in and out quickly bored her. She touched her clitoris herself, trying to think about something else. It didn't really work. Everything felt stupid, boring, and pointless.

"Talk to me…" she whispered in his ear.

"Huh?" he replied like a dummy doll.

Oh, how much she hated him at that moment. She kept wondering, after all the changes, where the heroes of the lost wars were; where the fallen angels of all the revolutions had gone; where the guardians of justice were-and why they were always somewhere far away from her. These tongue-tied, useless big cocks were her curse.

Five minutes passed. Then ten. Christine yawned. She had prepared her own foreplay, relaxed herself, put herself in the right mood. He hadn't had to make any effort at all. And still, he failed to please her.

It's hopeless, she thought.

She faked an orgasm and said she was tired, so he left.

As soon as she was alone, she sighed with relief. She sat at the edge of the bed and suddenly burst into tears.

Chapter 10

They Live

September 15th, 2064
Monday

It was 10 a.m. Christine was drinking coffee in her office when Peter rushed in.

"I want to show you something," he said. She calmly followed him.

They entered a hallway with soundproof, separated rooms. He showed her the first one. The smell of sweat and dried Orphenatia lingered near the door. Inside, there was a 57-year-old man holding his head in his hands and sobbing. His hygiene was visibly poor. He wore the expression of a sad orphan. The sight could break your heart, but things were not exactly as they seemed.

"He was the mayor of one of our cities," Peter explained. "Now he's in the narcissist cure program. Seeing him like this makes you want to reach out and soothe him like a good mother. But his cruelty was enormous. It was a dictatorship, and the people of the city could only be grateful to technological progress that his reign didn't result in hunger and poverty. Can you believe this poor child in a man's body was responsible for such terror?"

"I understand narcissism," Christine replied.

"I know you do. I just want to make sure you don't fall under their emotional spell. Empathy, you see, is not always useful in our job," he said.

"I'm not emotional. Just lonely," she sighed.

The inhabitant of the next room was standing in front of a mirror, delivering lectures as if there were some kind of audience behind it. He was convinced that someone was watching and listening to him, and he performed his little show - a strange mixture of professional lecturing

and episodes of hysterical bullying. He was certain there was someone behind that mirror, and nothing could shake that belief.

"He is a university professor. Or, better said, he was. After some time in this room, he stopped thinking about becoming normal - as much as that might be possible. He slid into psychosis. Many of these narcissists become paranoid or psychotic because they need an audience. Their chances for a cure are... well, let's just say these people are hopeless," Peter explained.

"There is only one way to change a man, you know?" Christine said.

"Oh? And what would that be, my dear?" Peter smiled.

"Not by waiting for him to start wearing diapers. You can only form a baby. You cannot change a fully formed man."

"It's dogmatic to believe that absolutely, isn't it? Maybe we can make them functional. It would be a Nobel Prize–level achievement if we could. You are aware of that, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes, but... I am very skeptical these days. Especially about those whose sexual dysfunction is part of their character."

The next room seemed familiar to Christine. It was Marco's room.

He was masturbating while staring at the screen. There would have been nothing particularly strange about that, and she might even have felt some hope for his well-being - but something was deeply wrong.

The film Marco was watching was not ordinary pornography, not even sadomasochistic material. Marco was staring at a scene in which a young man was slowly decapitating an older woman.

And he was aroused by it.

She screamed.

"How can he hate women so much, so deeply, so extremely?" she asked, shocked.

"He’s one of the hopeless ones," Peter said. "I know you like him. I know you like his looks, his status, his self-esteem, his intelligence. I know it turns you on, and I know you can’t help it. It’s your own trauma response."

"Then take me off the case!" she yelled.

"No, my dear. I’m not criticizing you. I understand you. You’ll get sick of the monster at some point. And that will be your own cure. I could easily replace you, but I think this is good for both of you. You will stay cold for as long as it takes, because you’re ashamed of your attraction to this maniac - and that could be beneficial. You are his chance for a cure," he said, trying to calm her. "I want to show you something."

He slowly walked to the next room, his body slightly trembling. Christine followed him.

The next room was home to a beautiful woman in her late fifties. She stood calmly in front of a mirror, putting on her makeup. She was mesmerizing and charming. You could barely see her age beneath the few wrinkles hidden under three layers of foundation. Her body was still striking - curvy and elegant like an Italian actress. Her large breasts sagged slightly with age, but otherwise she remained firm and voluptuous. Her flawless hourglass figure glistened with lotion; even through the door, you could almost sense the scent of freshly washed skin and strawberry cream.

"A female," Christine said quietly, a trace of sadness in her voice as she thought she could look like this with a little less weight and a bit more effort.

"Not just a female. This is my ex-wife," Peter said.

Christine froze in shock.

"I was suicidal for years. I didn’t exist. I was just a shadow, a ghost, nobody. I hadn’t felt like a real person for so long that I even forgot what it meant to exist. All the words she said, the things she did, her cheating,

the constant comparisons to others… My life wasn't a life. It was pure depression," he confessed. Christine could see tears in his eyes.

"I'm very sorry," she murmured. She wasn't sorry. She was relieved she wasn't the only one who felt like a victim of a life filled with endless irrationality.

"I couldn't resist. I'm just a man. But sometimes you must resist. I have no excuse. There is no forgiveness for what I did to my own soul. No god could ever forgive such a sin," he said.

Christine didn't know how to soothe him. He had always seemed distant to her - superior, more important, more intelligent. But at that moment, she felt they were equal. His green eyes met her dark pupils and a spark flickered in the air. He could smell the faint scent of her skin mixed with subtle lemon perfume. If there hadn't been the project, the experiment, he might have kissed her with such intensity that romance would have been inevitable.

Christine felt the spark - and she loved it.

But the situation required patience.

After the experiment was over, after they both overcame their pain - their war traumas, their heartbreaks - after they stopped carrying the weight of the world inside their chests, they would connect.

But not now.

Now was not the time.

They slowly walked back to her office, wrapped in silence. They spoke for hours about the structure of the experiment, the method of writing reports, and other professional yet irrelevant matters. They became hope for each other. Support. Motivation. A reason to smile in the morning.

He was her anchor. She was his star in the vast black sky of a devouring past.

Could there be passion?

Could they attract each other the way they were drawn to sadists in their past?

Could they feel a fatal kind of love - precisely because they were good people?

And worst of all: are they attracted to evil?

Do they need darkness to feel passion?

Or is there still a chance for a World War III survivor to become normal - to relax, to heal?

They had both felt that something was deeply wrong with them. Neither of them brought up the subject of failed relationships. They were still hiding the obvious loneliness. The leftovers of the Old World were not so easy to discard. And those numbers instead of last names were there to remind them where they belonged.

Peter was obsessed with his work and driven by restless ambition. He even dreamed of a Nobel Prize-or any significant recognition that might compensate for the fact that he had never fulfilled his original dreams. He had wanted to be a scientist, a researcher, but something had gone wrong and he had taken a job early in life instead of continuing his education. He had entered the money chase far too soon.

Christine had always wanted to be a psychologist, but her situation had been even more complicated. In her case, it had been the lack of money, so she had settled for a more modest school of economics and a job in industry. Then the war came. Then the diseases. The world nearly ended.

Neither of them knew which gods-or why-had chosen them to survive. Because for them, surviving had been as difficult as the war itself.

They couldn’t forget the Old World: the humiliations, the puppet theater of fake merit and invisible hierarchies. And above all, they found it unbearable to answer the most important question: was their survival a

punishment because they were weak-or a reward because they were strong?

In truth, it felt like both.

Christine made a cup of Orphenatia tea and drank it quickly. Peter refused the tea. He felt their conversation was pointless and that she was probably bored, yet some strange fear kept him in her office. His legs felt nailed to the chair.

Christine yawned.

He knew she was bored, so he fell silent, but he still couldn't leave. Something pulled him toward her, though he wouldn't dare try to kiss her. His ambition was stronger. More than anything, he wanted to prove to the world that a man without a last name, a man without a bloodline, a man who was just a number-a team made entirely of numbers-could change the world.

It was a noble ambition, but from time to time he wondered whether it was also narcissistic.

Christine, on the other hand, was tired. She wanted more from this life. The afterlife of survival bored her more and more. So when she realized Peter would neither leave her office nor ignite any spark of warmth or passion, she stood up and left.

Peter did not drink Orphenatia, even though he was nervous. Instead, he took real medication-calmers. He was already consuming them daily, convinced he would never stop and would probably die as a Valium junkie.

Christine went to a nearby café named "Illusia." She knew everything would have been different if they hadn't been war survivors, but there was nothing she could do about that. She could only take the best from the present moment.

The reason she chose this café, and not "Roadhouse Blues," was a man.

It was a bald man who often arrived at “Illusia” on a large blue motorbike. His face wasn’t conventionally handsome, but it had a certain imperfect charm, despite the acne scars. He would usually order an espresso with rum, then go to the toilet and wash his face with cold water. After that, he would sit down and wipe his face with his T-shirt, lifting it slightly so she could see his toned body-and another scar, a straight line across his flat stomach that looked like a knife wound.

Usually, she would just watch him, imagining him without the T-shirt, dressed in jeans with a black belt, while she lay completely naked in front of him. He would look at her too, from time to time.

Today, she decided to make a move.

She dropped a box of cigarettes by the bar. Then she pretended she had lost them, asking him whether he had perhaps seen a missing Marlboro pack. It was such an obvious and clumsy move. Still, he seemed not to understand.

She asked his name, trying to start a conversation, but the terrified man suddenly stood up, not even finishing his Irish espresso, and left without a word.

There was something deeply wrong with people in this city.

She wasn’t so terrible as to be undesirable. After all, Peter wanted her-she could feel it. But every time she made a move, she ended up facing frightened or dull men who had no idea what to do with her.

She should probably just move on, approach the next person nearby. But her choices were specific. They were the choices of a broken person looking for someone equally broken.

This man, for example, had been so frightened he completely forgot to pay for his coffee.

The waiter ran after him and grabbed his arm tightly.

“Don’t touch me!” he screamed.

Then he slowly, silently covered his face with his palms and whispered, “Please… don’t touch…”

He was broken, all right.

The phantom of madness lingered in the air, saturating the place.

Christine paid for her drink and went home.

Chapter 11

The Tomb

December 26th, 2064
Friday

Marco Po was sitting on the bed in his room, crying. Through childish tears and sobs, he was writing a letter to someone named Anne.

“Dear Anne,

This place I ended up in is a tomb for living souls. I’m switching between boredom and restlessness. I miss people. And, more than anything, I miss you. You are the only one who knew me and accepted me as I am. Maybe you’re a masochist, I’m not sure. Maybe you never cared enough about me to let me frustrate you. Your cold indifference made me nervous back in those days, but now I crave you - your presence, your calmness. I crave anyone’s presence.

I love to seduce. And what is so wrong with that? Tell me. I love when they love me. I love the fever of women in love, their tears when I discard them, their confusion when I suddenly reject their generous offerings. Do I deserve to be buried alive because of that? Tell me, Anne. Oh, tell me…

There is a robot installed above my bed here. Just a female voice telling me I’m a good boy and that she forgives me everything. Those bloody so-called psychologists think they will brainwash me so that I eventually believe the voice is my mother. Freudian nonsense. Oedipus crap. Useless machines.

That is my life now.

And no matter how hard they try to break me, I know I did and still do everything right. They won’t let me go until I somehow “cure.” Cure what? They don’t want me to hurt people. But I keep wondering - what is so wrong with some pain?

Pain made me strong. Successful. Handsome. Pain made me worthy.

And so what if I'm a bit mean sometimes? Aren't we all? We are beasts, and civilization is built on fear or interest. Politeness is nothing but a mask for our true intentions, which are never polite themselves.

Female desire - and male, too - made me satisfied, and made them amused. Their pain is nothing compared to what they receive in return. They taste the honeyed skin of perfection. They hear the mind of a genius. They smell the beauty of an eternal moment.

It cannot be wrong. I cannot be wrong.

Because, my dear Anne, each and every one of them loved it more than they regretted it. They even loved the pain, because it made them stronger, better, tougher.

I am their enlightenment.

I am everything they could never be - their dream come alive, their diploma they couldn't achieve, their job they were not capable of doing, their prince gifted to them by God himself, though they were never princesses."

"Sometimes, my spirit leaves my body. I can see myself from the outside, and I like what I see. The more I stare at myself, the more I realize they placed me here, in this madhouse, only because they are envious. They hate me for being so much better than them.

I look better than ever. I work out daily because everything is so boring here, and I've made it all the way to 500 push-ups a day, even 1,000 abs. It's a sin to keep me here at my most precious age-so handsome, so capable, so inspired. The world is eager to have me again. Just like you, Anne, the world is horny for me and not even trying to hide it. No change in the system, no New Age or new era is ever going to change that.

I am God's pure treasure, a diamond dug out of the mud of my demanding childhood, a perfectly formed jewel everyone wants to wear. But they're too envious to admit it. It's as if keeping me here will prove that I am the monster-and they are not.

Sometimes, I break things. I even thought about marking myself with a knife or scissors, carving beautiful scars that would remain as proof of their cruelty. They are numbers, my dear Anne. They shop at cheap stores, eat junk food, study useless nonsense, and believe they know something. They are so simple they cannot accept their own worthlessness. So jealousy is their only escape. They know they don't deserve me, and this is their little revenge.

And somehow, I am the monster-and they are not.

One historian wrote something utterly pointless. He said the temple of the Dark Ages was the church; the temple of socialism was the school; the temple of postmodernism was the shopping mall. So what if it was? I see no problem in that. Now what is the temple-an asylum, a hospital? What a way to build a better world.

I would still prefer a shopping mall or a bar over a hospital. They present the New Order as some kind of revolution, but we-the ones buried alive-we know the struggle. It's unfair. Deeply unfair. They have no right.

I used to surround myself with mirrors. Now, dear Anne, you are the only mirror I have. I look at you as if you are part of me-a limb, a fragment of my heart and soul.

Take me out of here, dearest Anne, and I will owe you forever. My life is in your hands.

Sincerely yours,
Marco."

After Marco Po finished writing the letter, he realized he didn't remember the address of the girl. In fact, he had never really gotten to know her. He wasn't even sure her name was Anne.

He wanted to throw the letter away, but then he had an idea. He could simply invent a random address and hand the letter to Christine. The letter would go nowhere, as they always did, but it would be a small and elegant trick to frustrate her.

She is lonely. Marco could see that.
She wants him. And he knows it.

But the fact that he cannot frustrate her is deeply painful to him.

Humiliating someone, inflicting emotional pain-that is what he enjoys most. It bores him quickly, yes, but that single moment-when he sees a woman angry or on the verge of tears-fills him with happiness and amusement, even if the feeling lasts only seconds.

It was never sexually arousing.

He was not a sadist in the narrow, physical sense. He loved emotional pain, not bodily harm. It gave him a brief, intense satisfaction-but not sexual excitement.

Sex itself was almost irrelevant to him. Sometimes even repulsive.

It could be the most beautiful woman, the most handsome boy, or a man-it didn't matter. He enjoyed the sensation of orgasm, but not nearly as much as he despised sweat, saliva, and bodily fluids-except his own. His own were, naturally, the best and purest in the world.

If he ever felt something resembling love, it was not the kind known to the rest of humanity. It was not affection. It was not connection.

It was possession.

It was the desire to consume someone entirely and then discard her like waste-like the disappointment she always inevitably proved to be.

Marco Po deeply, profoundly hated reality.

Though reality is not a fairytale, nor a pure representation of beauty, other people could still find something worth living for in it-even after the war.

But for Marco, the war meant nothing.

He hated the world before the war, during the war, and after the war with the same intensity. Perhaps he hated the smiling, happy world even more.

Why do they smile, dirty peasants?
What reason do they have to smile, those stupid numbers?

Their happiness-so irritating, so offensive to him-made him embrace the gray hurricane of chaos. The system craves chaos; it always collapses, following the well-known patterns of history. And when chaos comes, his god Seth will grant his dearest Marco five minutes of glory and revenge.

The last supper will be his feast.

Until then, Marco thought, no amount of sobbing would help him. Crying had been foolish. But a drop of tears would look convincing on the letter he had written. And if someone read it, perhaps it might awaken empathy from an unknown source.

And maybe-just maybe-that source would set him free from the asylum.

Until then, he decided to get up and do another five hundred push-ups, so he would be the best-looking man alive when fate finally knocked on his door.

Chapter 12

The 13th Session

Jan 12th, 2065, Monday

“This is your thirteenth session, Marco,” Christine said while Marco Po stared at the window in her office. He had refused his cup of Orphenatia.

“Our next step, Marco, is medication. If you continue demolishing your apartment, we’ll have to put you on antipsychotics. They’re effective. They will make you feel calmer…”

“Oh, you monsters! You envious little men!” he yelled.

“You are not making progress, Marco. We have no choice.”

“I am the progress! What more do you need?”

“A stable psyche. And your willingness to change,” she replied calmly.

“There is nothing wrong with me,” he insisted.

“Look, I’ll be honest with you. Do you want to stay locked in here forever?” she asked.

“I will kill myself if you do that.”

“You won’t, Marco. You are a narcissist. You will never kill yourself for two reasons. First, people like you rarely commit suicide under any circumstances. Second, it would be our victory-and that’s the last thing you would ever give us.”

“It wouldn’t be your victory,” he objected. “It would be Peter’s victory. You have nothing to do with it. You, my dear, are just a pawn in his little game of ambition. You survived a tectonic change of the world so many times and still managed to become nothing but a lonely, overweight pawn. You will always be just a worthless number.”

“You are such a pain in the ass,” she said calmly, though she had to fight the urge to roll her eyes.
“You’d like my pain up your ass, wouldn’t you?” he laughed. The conversation amused him.

“I said I would be honest. Look, Marco, your sexual behavior is also deeply affected by your personality disorder. When we encounter individuals like you, we usually classify them as hopeless. Prove us wrong.”

“You don’t really care about that, my dear. You need a vacation. You need that Peter boy to take you somewhere, grab you, and kiss you passionately. But he hesitates because he needs you for this project. His little experiment is more important to him than you as a woman. You’re getting older, and soon no one will want you. You’re spent, and it has nothing to do with my sexuality or my personality. Don’t use me as an excuse for your failure as a woman.”

“Are you done?” Christine asked.

“Are you pissed off?” Marco replied.

“No. You are a sick man. Nothing you say has meaning until you show interest in becoming a better person.”

“I am the best person you’ll ever meet,” he said arrogantly.

“Wow. You really crave to stay locked in here forever. Deep inside, you want to be punished, don’t you? Let’s not rush to conclusions. Maybe there’s hope in that. Let’s draw today,” Christine said.

“Again? Drawing is boring,” he frowned.

“What would you rather do?”

“I’d rather watch your funny little play with Peter - the thing you call passion or love - and laugh my ass off. God, you weak people are hilarious. Your fears, your romances, your silly little cries against the monstrous nature of human beasts…”

“You’re being mean today. You can draw that. Draw your menace.”

Marco, like a sulking little boy, grabbed a pen and drew a penis.

What an impressive self-portrait, Christine thought, but she said nothing. Prolonging this game would have been ridiculous.

“There you go,” Marco said.

“Thank you. We’re done for today,” she nodded.

“Already? But I have no one to talk to. I’ll go crazy!” He sounded both frightened and genuinely surprised.

“If you want longer sessions, you’ll have to learn to draw with more passion. We can talk only while you draw. Until then, I’m sorry - you’re on your own,” she said firmly.

“You bloody monsters! I’ll never get out of here! You put me in this paid prison with a fancy garden and I fell for it! But I will win - you’ll see!” he shouted, furious.

“I truly hope you will win, Marco. I truly hope…” she replied.

As he left her office, she couldn’t help herself - she rolled her eyes and sighed.

She hated him with all her heart.

Unfortunately, the opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. And this hate was the problem.

She knew that if she ruined this experiment, Peter would never forgive her. More importantly, she would never prove she was not just a pawn. She would fail again - both as a professional and as a woman. And that failure would be final and spectacular.

Maybe she could turn that failure into an asset and finally find peace. But she wasn’t ready yet. She wasn’t ready to turn her back on the

world's demands and rewards, on the idea of success, on the idea of passion and love, on the very idea of life itself.

And that was the only reason she couldn't fight the hatred slowly poisoning her.

Because once you have seen the pre-war world, once you have lived through war and realized how worthless your life is - how your precious life is cheaper than a condom, cheaper than a pack of gum you buy daily at a kiosk - there is no going back. You can never return to believing the world cares.

You are just a number.

That's it.

Dead or alive, you are statistical data.

And sometimes, the only way to survive is to go delusional and convince yourself there are gods who love you when no one else does.

Suddenly, someone knocked on the door and entered the office. It was a tall, bald man with a neatly trimmed beard, dressed in an expensive suit.

"May I?" he asked politely.

"Be my guest," she replied.

"My name is Don. I've heard that my old colleague is being held here in captivity, against his will."

"We keep no one against their will. All participants in our experiment signed a contract and voluntarily agreed to take part in the program."

"You are not a scientist. You are a fraud. You are just a number."

"It is against the law to speak that way, sir. You are not permitted to humiliate people for having numbers instead of last names. That privilege is reserved only for those properly diagnosed and placed in an asylum. Would you like to join our little community, Mr. Don?" Christine

was exhausted from humiliation, and this time she was genuinely angry. These men allowed themselves far too much.

“My apologies. I did not intend to insult the great psychologist,” Don said, his tone polite but dripping with sarcasm.

“That’s better, Mr. Don. My name is Christine. How can I help you?”

“I want you to deliver this letter to my dear friend and colleague, Marco Po,” he said, handing her a folded sheet of paper.

“And you, my friend, are also a mathematician?” Christine asked.

“I’m a postdoc, actually,” he replied proudly.

“Now, please-if there is any reason left in you-consider my words. Any contact with our experimental patients is strictly forbidden. I can report you for this,” Christine said, her voice polite but cold, the threat unmistakable.

Don did not step back.

Instead, he placed a single sheet of paper on her desk and, without another word, left the office slowly and confidently.

Christine picked up the paper and realized it contained only a short story. It was Borges’ “The House of Asterion.” She began to read:

"I know that I am accused of arrogance and perhaps misanthropy, and perhaps even madness. These accusations (which I shall punish in due time) are ludicrous. It is true that I never leave my house, but it is also true that its doors (whose number is infinite) stand open night and day to men and also to animals. Anyone who wishes to enter may do so. Here, no womanly splendors, no palatial ostentation shall be found, but only calm and solitude. Here shall be found a house like none other on the face of the earth. (Those who say there is a similar house in Egypt speak lies.) Even my detractors admit that there is not a single piece of furniture in the house. Another absurd tale is that I, Asterion, am a prisoner..."

She suddenly stopped and realized the man was someone already familiar to her - he was Miss Andrea.

On one hand, it seemed he wanted to help his lover. On the other hand, he had come here out of fear. He was probably a narcissist himself. He was terrified of being locked away, and he was doing all this not out of compassion for his former lover, but to prevent the same fate from reaching him.

Still deeply conflicted about his own identity, he feared the asylum more than death itself.

To Christine, his fear was proof that the experiment was moving in the right direction.

And yet, these half-awakened men still believed someone was persecuting them out of envy for their perfection. What a ridiculous delusion. Only an unloved child - a wealthy orphan raised by cold, ambitious parents - could end up in such a childish, paranoid fantasy.

These were not people you should hate.

They were people you should pity.

And, more importantly, people who had to be stopped from causing further damage to the world.

But she was afraid.

No one had ever come forward to defend any of the narcissists locked inside the institute. No one had cared. Everyone they had known had been hurt by them. The experiment had been safe - until now.

This man could destroy everything.

He could go public. He could announce the isolation program. People might be deceived by the charm of these monsters labeled with a narcissistic diagnosis. They might rebel. They might demand freedom for the “misunderstood geniuses.”

The safest solution would be to release Marco Po - to declare him unsuitable for the experiment. His diagnosis could be softened. Adjusted. He would walk free again.

And he would continue to wound people already standing on the edge of their mental endurance.

Those not killed by the war would be destroyed by men like Marco Po.

The thought made her tremble.

She needed Orphenatia.

Christine quickly stood up, took a tea bag, and dropped it into a cup of hot water. It had no scent, but she didn't pay attention, assuming the tea might be old.

She drank it while it was still hot and felt an instant wave of relief.

She thought Orphenatia was a true treasure of nature - a tranquilizer without side effects, a diamond from the garden of the gods. The best cure the Earth had ever offered to humankind.

As she finished the last sip and felt her body sink into a state of deep, velvety calm, her eyes drifted to the box from which she had taken the tea bag.

It was not Orphenatia.

Right there on the box, in plain letters, it read:

"Mint Tea."

For a second, her mind refused to process it. Then she let out a short, sharp scream.

- The great Orphenatia was a placebo! It has been a placebo all this time! -

Chapter 13

The Nameless

Jan 13th, 2065
Tuesday

"Why didn't you tell me?" Christine asked, staring at Peter with a mixture of doubt and disappointment.

"I wasn't sure Orphenatia was a placebo. I suspected it. But no one ever confirmed it to me," he replied.

"But you knew. Deep down, you knew." Her voice cracked.

"Does it matter? It works. That's what matters."

"It matters to me! If you cared about me - about one human being more than your ambition and your bloody experiment - you would have told me!"

Peter remained calm, though something in his eyes shifted.

"There was no point in telling you."

"No point?" she laughed bitterly. "So what now? Now that I've figured it out? How am I supposed to cure myself - or anyone else? I can't lie to people. I can't build healing on deception."

He hesitated for a moment.

"I can give you Valium. I take it daily. It makes you a little dependent, yes… but it works. It's a good, old drug. Reliable. What harm can it do?"

Her hands were shaking.

"I'm sorry, Christine," his voice softened. "There is no magical substance that can cure the life we lived. Or the fact that we survived it."

She inhaled slowly, forcing the air into her lungs as if the air itself were heavy.

"It’s all right. I’ll survive. I always do." She wiped her tears impatiently. "But why? Why do I survive? What for? My job is worthless. Built on a placebo. On illusion. I’m just another replaceable number. Anyone could sit in that chair and nod wisely. The effect is zero anyway. I’m not even strong enough or smart enough to be what I wanted to be. There was no reason for me to survive. It was just a random throw of divine dice. And my parents… my good parents are dead. My sister is dead. Good people died in that gambling of some higher force that decided to spare the malignant and kill my mother!"

Her voice collapsed.

"I need my mom…"

The room grew unbearably quiet.

For the first time since the war, Christine did not feel like a professional, or a survivor, or a number.

She felt like a child.

And no placebo in the world could fill that absence.

Seeing her collapse, Peter stood up and came closer. He wrapped his arms around her.

Her sobbing grew louder, deeper, almost animal-like. Salty tears and saliva soaked into his shirt, leaving stains across the fabric, but he didn’t care. He couldn’t find the right words. Nothing he could say would fix this. So he kissed her forehead and simply held her.

He held her for an hour.

Eventually, he prescribed Valium, and she took it. She couldn’t fight this alone.

“There is no logic,” she whispered. “They were numbers and they died. I’m a number and I’m alive. Who made that choice? And why?”

“I don’t know,” he answered quietly. “But I know you are not worthless. You are capable. You are lovable. You are beautiful - even when pollution makes your skin flare, even when you gain weight and I can see the soft curve of your belly beneath your clothes, even when your nipples press against the cold cotton of your shirt, even when you smile like a naïve little girl despite being the smartest woman I’ve ever met. And your strength leaves me breathless more each day. You are a fighter. You are here, standing your ground for this world, for what we believe in, for the future - even when it hurts you. There is a future, Christine. And you are loved. I mean that with all my heart.”

As he said it, he turned his head slightly away - stopping himself from kissing her until the experiment was over.

“Thank you…” she murmured as the Valium began to soften the sharp edges of her panic. “I just… I don’t believe I’m worth anything anymore. And it’s simple, Peter… I miss my mother.”

“You need time,” he said gently. “Take a month off. Go to the seaside - the Institute will cover it. Or stay here. Walk in the park. But stop thinking about malignants. Stop thinking about love. Or sex. You’re too fragile right now - like Cinderella’s glass slipper. You need quiet. And time.”

“I agree,” she replied. “I will take some rest - but under one condition. I want to release Marco Po. He is hopeless. I see no purpose in keeping him here except to exist and to hurt me. Give me another patient - an ex-politician, an elite prostitute, an actress, a businessman. A king himself. A child-eater. A pedophile. Anyone but him. Or… remove me from this experiment entirely and let me work with war survivors. I want to help people in need, not try to fix a demon sent from hell to destroy everything and everyone in his path.”

Peter studied her carefully.

“If your professional opinion is that he is hopeless, then I suppose that is the truth. We cannot fake the results of the experiment.” He paused. “I

approve releasing him. But you understand what that means. As someone deemed incurable, he will eventually end up in permanent confinement. Once the law against narcissistic abuse is passed, he will be removed from society for life. A life sentence."

He looked at her closely. "Is that truly what you want for him?"

"I don't care about him," she said coldly. "I hate him. I wish he were dead instead of my family. I wish there were a deity who could bring my mother back and send that PhD super-scientist straight to hell where he belongs."

Peter exhaled slowly.

"I must admit… he may indeed be a lost case." His voice carried quiet resignation. "I'm sorry, Christine. That makes five failures."

He stood.

"Go. Take your rest. Now. You've earned it."

When Christine stepped out of the Institute and entered the park, she felt an overwhelming sense of relief. The calming dark green of the trees, the bright blue sky, bulky gray birds pecking at bread crumbs, the smile-wrinkled face of an old lady, teenagers hiding behind the block and smoking while greeting the brave new world with careless joy - it all felt like a new life. Like a blooming flower. New people. New chances. A life without that old, familiar, hollow stare of traumatized generations.

It felt so good to be separated from Marco.

No fear of words sharp as a butcher's knife. No fear of manipulation. No acidic burn of past humiliations. Nature heals within minutes. Life is beautiful without Marco.

She became even more determined to get rid of him.

Calmness, determination, and light happiness mixed inside her with grief for the dead. She bought a strawberry cream tea from a nearby stand and let it slide down her throat, blending with the bitter trace of Valium.

It was a new feeling - liberation from them, from the demons, from their expectations and their will to wound, from their illogical hatred toward goodness in others.

And then she heard a meow.

Under a chestnut tree, a small kitten darted between fallen leaves while a man in uniform tried to catch the stubborn little creature. It was thin and awkward, with oversized ears and a runny nose - ugly, perhaps, but irresistible in its own way.

“Is this your cat?” she asked the man.

“No,” he replied, slightly out of breath. “He’s a stray from our shelter. A little runaway. I’m trying to bring him back. He’s available for adoption, if you’re interested.” He smiled. “But be warned - he’s stubborn and wild. Come here, kitty, kitty… 52884, come here…”

“He’s a number?” Christine asked.

“All orphans are numbers, of course. It’s practical. Easier to catalogue them that way. I’ll give you an adoption contract with the number on it, you sign, and the little monster is yours.”

“And I will sign as a number too,” she said quietly. “A war orphan.”

The man paused.

“I’m very sorry for your loss. A family member?”

“My whole family. They were good people. But no one protects good people. The universe sometimes makes strange choices - it kills angels and keeps devils.”

“There must be somewhere,” the man said gently, “where cosmic justice is restored. Somewhere it all makes sense.”

She bent down and gently scooped up the kitten. It struggled at first, then stilled against her chest.

“I’ll name him Bernard,” she said softly. “The herald of the Brave New World.”

“If you can catch him,” the man smiled.

After he left, Christine remained alone with the frightened kitten. She looked at him, and he looked back at her.

And suddenly, she thought - this could be love.

The kitten slowly approached and began sniffing around her feet. By looking into her deep, dark eyes, he seemed to understand - she was not a threat. She was a large creature with the strange scent of body lotion and faint, sweet sweat, but she did not smell of danger.

He stood beside her shoes, still cautious, but no longer fleeing.

Trust, slow and fragile, revealed itself in small steps.

Christine crouched down and gently extended her hands. This time, he did not run. She lifted him carefully. His body was light, almost weightless. When he began to purr in her lap, the sound was so steady, so warm, that it felt like a tiny engine restarting something inside her chest.

She kissed his damp, slightly runny nose without hesitation.

It was her Bernie now.

A brave new kitten, bringing with him the possibility of a different kind of order - not control, not dominance, not experiment - but love.

A soul had spoken to a soul.

Chapter 14

The Great Escape

Jan 17th, 2065
Monday

Marco Po woke up with a faint smile on his face.

He could never fully remember his dreams, though fragments sometimes lingered when they were vivid. This time, he remembered the color of the sky - red and orange - while he was flying above wild mountains barely visible beneath fresh clouds of fog. It had been an exhilarating dream.

But Marco never cared much about subconscious night images. He didn't try to interpret them. For him, dreams were just brief flashes - like love or happiness - too short to preserve, too inconsistent to matter. Once the moment passed, it left behind only a fading memory stripped of emotion, reduced to mild nostalgia that didn't trouble him.

And the only feeling that remained constant on the surface of his mind, as always, was emptiness. Boredom.

But this morning was different.

He was thinking about his escape.

Two months earlier, he had been assigned a job at the asylum. It was simple manual work, meant only to keep his body occupied. He was to paint traffic signs with an invisible varnish that glowed in the dark.

That was when the idea came.

The varnish was transparent and non-sticky. Marco decided to apply it to the dial of a digital door lock located in the park. The park itself was not covered by cameras - it would have been impossible to install surveillance on every treetop, as the pines were tall and dense.

So he painted the lock.

On Sunday, assuming minimal activity around the building, he carefully coated the keypad. His reasoning was simple: when a guard entered the code to exit, the varnish would be rubbed off the specific digits used. Those digits, no longer covered, would not glow in the dark.

That was why Marco woke up at six in the morning on Monday. The grounds were still dark and quiet.

He walked into the park carrying a small battery light and stood in front of the digital lock. He shone the light directly onto the keypad, putting the phosphorus varnish on it.

After five minutes, he switched the light off. Just as he expected, all digits glowed - except four: 2, 3, 6, and 8. The code had to contain those numbers. All he needed now was the correct order. Simple probability theory.

There were twenty-four possible combinations. He began with the descending sequence.

8-6-3-2.

The lock clicked open on the first try.

Marco smiled.

But he didn’t leave.

Walking out immediately would be reckless. Too obvious. He decided to wait until nightfall. By then, the staff would assume he was asleep. The odds of being caught would be significantly lower.

And so he waited.

At exactly 23:00 that same evening, Marco Po - a once-successful scientist, now stripped of dignity and patience - could be seen sneaking out of the asylum on all fours.

Impulsive as ever, he could barely restrain himself from standing upright and sprinting toward the nearest 24/7 shopping mall.

Luckily - or perhaps unfortunately - no one saw him.

Marco entered a restroom in the mall and washed his hands and face. He dusted off his pants, sprayed on some perfume and a touch of hairspray, and stepped back into the night, inhaling deeply - pride and pleasure filling his lungs.

The wolf hour under city lights.

His natural habitat.

A victim-like predator.

But before arranging that charming smile on his pale, slightly distorted face, there was one more task. He needed something from the mall.

The problem was - he had no money.

And then he remembered. This was no longer capitalism. Under the New Order, money was not required for basic necessities. He burst into laughter - loud, unhinged, clownish - right there in the darkness splashed by rare neon lights.

The New Order malls were not what they once had been. Every citizen was allowed a minimal quantity of essential goods - a humanitarian reform after the war. The system ensured that no one would starve or lack basic items. If someone took only a small amount of necessary food or tools, the robotic sellers would let them pass without payment or even recording personal data.

So Marco entered calmly and selected a small box of tools for repairing smartwatches.

He needed them to attempt manipulation of his poly-bracelet later.

Just like that, the practical part of the night was complete.

Now he could have fun.

Sunday was not the richest hunting ground for a city predator, but there was always some open bar offering a gig, free entrance, and happy hour. He found an underground bar called Spiky Shark. The name promised more than the crowd delivered, but he told himself that tonight he could not afford to be selective.

Any woman would do.

At least there was a happy hour.

He ordered a free beer. Then a shot of vodka. Then another beer. Life began to feel good again. Marco desperately needed to start talking. He found an average-looking woman and began a conversation. It felt beyond amazing to see an adult woman swallow his hook without asking him to draw something. He was the master again - a god restored - firmly on his feet, his head high in the clouds of irresistible omnipotence.

He was everything at once.

Everyone seemed to be looking at him - an adorable, infinite winner. It was as if the shining greatness of his perfection had never been locked away. It never could and never would fade.

As soon as the woman he was flirting with became genuinely interested, he grew bored. He let her pay for his drinks and skillfully withdrew from the conversation, leaving her wondering what she had done wrong. Nothing, of course. It was never about her. It was always about him.

And then he saw someone else.

A tall blonde in tight leather pants stood in the corner of the room, gripping her beer bottle as if squeezing it might keep her from slipping off her thin, glittering heels. She looked as if she were waiting for something. Expecting something.

And it seemed painfully clear that whatever she was waiting for would never arrive.

She stood there like a statue - frozen in a years-long anticipation of a promise that would never be fulfilled. Not for a modern, slightly dreamy woman in her thirties, lost in a rock bar, stranded by the night, far from the bright future the world had once promised her as a little girl.

Perfect prey, he thought.

As Marco started a conversation with the woman, he found out her name was Maria. She was lonely, a bit insecure, nostalgically stuck in a past that was not pleasant for most, but obviously holding on to memories Maria could not let go of. A bit of charm, and Maria was ready to give her hopes for the night to any decent, average-looking man. Of course, he approached her.

He saw a spark of hope in her eyes. Marco knew those eyes very well. They were the eyes of a woman hoping for true love, no matter how cynical her words might be. It was the spark of a perfect prey, a spark no woman could hide, a spark so naive and primordial that no female intelligence could fight against it. He felt good knowing that he would disappoint her.

They had a short, typical conversation before she finally invited him to her place. He felt amused seeing her tremble from slight anxiety and sweet passion. As she took her clothes off, he noticed she was perfectly shaved. He was indifferent about it — to him it was a sign that this woman took good care of herself. Maybe she was of a higher class? Maybe she even had a last name. He stated in his mind that she might be useful to him, so he acted it out. He pretended he was fascinated and passionate, and the intercourse was intense. He fucked her hard. But his mind was distracted, and it was impossible for him to orgasm. He spat on his fingers and slightly placed the spit onto her back door. She moaned loudly, but he still wasn’t satisfied. He blamed her for that, of course.

While he was putting his clothes on, he analyzed her apartment, looking for proof that she might be a high-class lady: a diploma, paintings on the wall that might be signed with a last name, any proof that she was not just a number. He could not find anything. Still, he took her phone number, thinking that she might still be of some use.

As he was walking out of the apartment, he realized he had forgotten even her first name. It made him laugh.

As the night started to fade and the cold smell of dawn filled the air, he hurried to the Institute.

Chapter 14

The Last Session

March 16th, 2065
Wednesday

Escapes from the Institute had become Marco's little ritual. Nobody caught him for months. Usually, he would sneak out at night, searching for open bars, lonely women, and free booze.

After returning to his room, he carefully avoided the camera angles and pretended he had only gone to the bathroom. While sitting on the toilet, he used fine tools to reprogram his poly-bracelet. Breaking its logic was easier than he had expected. He simply severed the wired contact between the lie-and-emotion detector and the signal lights. After several nights of careful adjustments, the operation was complete.

The bracelet no longer lit up.

He felt exhilarated. He had outsmarted them all.

Once he broke the chain of isolation, life became bearable again - even exciting. The depersonalization episodes stopped. He almost felt truly alive. He admired his reflection in the mirror, adjusting his posture, preparing for his session with Christine.

Christine was already waiting in her office.

She felt relief knowing Marco Po would soon be released. She was so exhausted by him that he no longer seemed attractive. The passion he once stirred in her had faded slowly, almost imperceptibly, as she began to see his character clearly - not tragic, but grotesque. More caricature than devil.

She almost laughed at herself for ever being drawn to him.

Now he was simply a number: Patient 1666. Nothing more, nothing less.

When Marco entered the room, she felt nothing. She noticed his good mood, his confidence, his upright posture - but only as observable facts.

“I will be completely honest with you, Marco,” she said calmly. “The experiment with you is over. You will receive your payment on your way out. You are free to leave whenever you wish.”

“Oh? Why? Am I cured?” he asked, feigning surprise.

“It’s a procedural decision. That is all you need to know.”

“But… I just want to tell you something…”

“As you wish.”

Her voice was neutral. No irritation. No fatigue. No emotion.

“I… I…” he stammered - and then burst into tears. “I’m truly sorry.”

Christine froze.

She glanced at the bracelet.

No red light.

He might be telling the truth.

There was no green light either - which meant the apology could not be verified as absolute truth. But the absence of red was already something.

“I know I was wrong. Maybe Ivy was a good wife. I made so many mistakes. I can’t forgive myself. I… please, don’t leave me alone in this.”

Again, no red light.

Christine felt something she hadn’t felt in months: genuine astonishment.

A small step for one man.

A giant leap for humanity.

“I don’t understand how I could have… what kind of man was I? It was a little baby-my child. She was my good wife. I… I’m falling apart…,” Marco whispered, crying.

Then he rose from the chair, slid down to the floor with his back against the wall, and continued to atone in a broken murmur. He kept sobbing the entire time. At one point, he began rocking back and forth, unable to bear the crushing weight of his realization. He even mentioned suicide. He begged Christine to go with him now that he was free, not to leave him alone in this hellish pit.

Christine was fascinated and deeply shaken, but she quickly assumed a professional posture. She made him a cup of Orphenatia tea, even though she knew it was a placebo, and-following her conscience-she gave him a Valium tablet and wrote a psychiatric referral. She sat beside him and let him rest his head against her chest.

He cried for hours while she thought.

If she left with him now, she wouldn’t be breaking any rules-he was a free man. She couldn’t leave him alone. The risk of suicide was too high. She decided to wait until Marco calmed down and then quietly walked with him toward the exit of the Institute.

When the rush of fresh air from the approaching spring struck them, his mood shifted dramatically. He strode down the street in long steps, boldly inhaling freedom. She followed him, growing slightly suspicious. But no one knows what a narcissistic sadist looks like when a cure begins to take effect-no one has ever been cured. She told herself this must be part of the natural healing process.

Then he stopped, smiled, and pulled her toward him. He pressed her against the wall of an abandoned house and kissed her so innocently, so sincerely, that her doubt retreated at once.

Suspicion gave way to pride in the success of the therapy-and to a faint thrill from the tremor his kiss awakened inside her. It was as if he were an entirely different man, new and reborn-just as handsome, just as

proud, but blank as a sheet of paper upon which history had yet to be written.
They were crossing the bridge.

“Watch out for the car!” she shouted.

“Ah, Christine, look-there are a thousand cars coming straight at me,” he laughed.

She noticed that his poly-bracelet did not flash red.

“Poly-bracelets don’t recognize humor. What you just said should have been registered as a lie because, literally, there aren’t a thousand cars here. It should have flashed red. Your poly-bracelet isn’t working. You’re lying,” she realized.

Her face turned pale, and large tears froze in her eyes beneath a dark shadow of horror. Marco burst out laughing.

Paralyzed, Christine couldn’t run. He pulled out a gun.

“Now, stand nicely right there in front of me so there won’t be any trouble,” he said. “You stupid, lonely, pathetic woman… did you really think a mind like mine couldn’t cut two little wires inside a poly-bracelet? There’s one problem you didn’t foresee, you self-taught, half-educated numbers: in this world, I always win. And do you know why? Because I can-and no one can stop me. You people are too lazy, too sleepy, too selfish to stop me. And that’s why I will always, always win. Now look down, beneath the stairs,” Marco ordered, pointing the gun at her.

“Lower your head and look!” he barked harshly.

Christine lowered her head, not even knowing why she obeyed. It wasn’t that she wanted to stay alive badly enough to betray life itself. Still, she looked to the left, toward the stairs descending from the bridge to the pedestrian path.

At the bottom of the steps lay her cat-her Bernie-dead. Killed.

Marco was entertained by hurting her through such vile acts. In that moment, it became clear to her that Marco had been escaping from the Institute to commit all sorts of atrocious things, though she still didn't know how he managed it.

She did not cry.

Instead of tears, anger and strength grew inside her with a force that surpassed human limits and the laws of reality.

She asked herself whether surviving such humiliation-lowering her head, bending her spine-was worth it. Was there truly such a submissive, enslaved soul within her that had accepted humiliation as natural and deserved? In that instant, she understood why she had not died in the war. To survive meant to bow, to allow yourself to be trampled, to sell yourself-and the reward for survivors was the lie that they were precious.

The old system and its consequences could not be erased by a war compensation of one or two hundred thousand, by a nice job and a free vacation by the sea. They had allowed her to lose herself, to let her soul dry up like a moldy prune in a devastated city of blood and ruins, and they thought all that damage could be paid off with compensation. And Christine had accepted it-first in fear, under bombs, and later simply because she had become a slave. Her soul had almost imperceptibly turned into an unwanted stray dog trained in helplessness.

Decades of humiliation, decades of being trampled, had been survived only because of hope for a better world. And when that better world finally arrived, once again some insignificant madman was threatening her with a gun, demanding obedience.

She would not do it one more time.

Enough was enough.

Humiliation would end here and now, no matter the cost.

Christine lunged at Marco with inhuman strength that defied all logic. She tore the gun from his hand with shocking ease and aimed it directly at his head, stepping back a few paces to keep her distance.

Rage was boiling inside her.

“Fuck you, Marco. Fuck you!” she shouted.

“You’re just a miserable little man. Like all the others like you-and you’ll remain that way until your final defeat. That’s why you look for victims who are alone, weaker, who have no one to protect them. That’s why you cheer for lawlessness and call it freedom. But the pain never disappears, does it? Where your soul should be, there’s only a stinking oil stain of envy and agony. You are failed children of God. You are unloved caricatures of your twisted mothers, failed beings of nothingness, hollow shells the sea of life simply washed ashore. You are shadows of past ghosts, capable only of violence and nothing more,” Christine raged, boiling with fury.

Suddenly, Marco lunged at her in panic, trying to snatch the gun from her hands. But she was possessed by a superhuman strength, by a demon of vengeance so fierce that she managed to shove him back. From the force and inertia, Marco staggered, slamming hard against the bridge railing. His whole body arched backward and, for a split second, he lost his footing.

That moment was enough.

He toppled over the railing and fell into the river below.

Christine stood frozen.

Murder or accident?

It didn’t matter to her.

She wiped the gun clean of fingerprints with a handkerchief, threw it into the river, and, numb and emptied out, calmly walked back to her apartment.

Chapter 15

Resurrection

March 29th, 2065
Tuesday

The red Orphenatia had begun to bloom, promising a warm spring. In the courtyard of the Institute, its flowers already spread an intoxicating fragrance, mesmerizing all who beheld them. The swelling greenery offered peace and shelter. War survivors suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder — some without limbs, some with faces burned beyond recognition, some simply mute and deaf, others merely disconnected from the world — wandered through the Institute's courtyard in search of calm. All of them were trying, once again, to find themselves. Most were unusually silent, and some did not speak at all. Their eyes often betrayed numbness or fear. The Institute's garden radiated an atmosphere of serenity, as though it were attempting to absorb the specters of trauma and painful memories.

Among the survivors with severe post-traumatic stress disorder was Christine. She sat almost completely paralyzed in her wheelchair. Since that night, she had not spoken a single word. She remained silent, only occasionally moving her hand or turning her head toward the sight of soothing nature. Peter pushed her wheelchair, quietly recounting old classics to her — the stories of Charles Dickens, ancient fairy tales, and the gentle poetry of the past.

Since Mark Poe had been found dead on the riverbank and his death ruled a suicide, the experiment on treating narcissistic personality disorder had gained significance. Peter had drawn the attention of the scientific community. Funding for the continuation of the project had increased. Although suicide had not been the outcome science had hoped to achieve, Mark Poe's confession instilled enormous hope for a possible cure. Peter had every reason to be proud: his ambition was nearly fulfilled, and his name was recognized among international scientific circles. And yet, he was not happy. He had lost Christine.

Since they found Christine in her apartment, she had been almost catatonic. She did not speak at all, and her movements were minimal.

Her gaze was glassy, almost as if her pupils were fading. Her vitality and energy had fallen to zero, and she was immediately hospitalized at the Institute. She did not move her legs at all; only occasionally would she extend her arms and turn her head toward the trees and flowers, seeking calm and yearning for the breath of nature. She was unable to feed herself and was cared for at the Institute. Sometimes she would reach toward a strong, black coffee, asking for a sip or two. She showed no interest in Orphenatia tea.

That Tuesday, Peter came to visit her. He pushed her wheelchair and spoke to her softly, soothingly, almost penitently. He felt guilty. Christine was half a person, half a frail shadow — an exhausted specter of the past.

Suddenly, he leaned toward her and whispered:

“I saw that the poly-bracelet was malfunctioning. I know he lied. I believe you killed him. But it doesn’t matter to me. His death has been ruled a suicide. No one blames you. I don’t blame you. It was a moment of weakness, a blackout of your abused mind. In truth, it was an accident, not a murder. These things often happen to abused people. The psyche has its limits. You are not at fault, nor are you ill. In any case, no trial will be conducted, and no one would condemn you even if there were. Please, come back to me. None of this was worth losing you.”

But Christine remained motionless, staring only at a single red Orphenatia.

“I know I was wrong,” he whispered. “I exposed you to horror. I didn’t think about your fragility, nor about your lion-hearted strength that awakened so suddenly. I put pressure on you. I was like the chief of the Old Order — ruthless and mad with ambition. If you ask me whether it was worth it, it wasn’t. If I could turn back time, I would stop everything, the entire experiment. I would never have allowed this to happen to you. Please forgive me. Please come back to us. You don’t have to do it all at once — awaken slowly, quietly, at your own pace — just don’t deprive me, or the world, of you. You are far too valuable to lose.”

Peter began to cry. Yet it was only a moment of weakness — one that did not compel him to halt the experiment or hand it over to someone else. His ambition remained strong. Although he might not have been

aware of it at that moment, the truth was simpler than what he had told Christine. No, he was not prepared to abandon the experiment. And even if he could turn back time, he would not stop it.

Deep inside, Christine knew that.

He had not loved her enough.

The old Christine would never have asked him to choose between her and his work. Her deepest need had only been not to be exposed to abuse. All she had needed was for him not to draw her into that project. But she had been too confused, too accustomed to narcissistic mistreatment to even know how to say, “No, I don’t want this.” Or perhaps she had been too proud to say, “No, I can’t.”

Peter softly began to retell a fairy tale:

“And she quickly struck the whole bundle of matches, for she wished to keep her grandmother with her. And the matches burned with such a glow that it became brighter than daylight. Grandmother had never been so grand and beautiful. She took the little girl in her arms, and both of them flew in brightness and joy above the earth, very, very high, and up there was neither cold, nor hunger, nor fear-they were with God.

But in the corner, leaning against the wall, sat the little girl with red cheeks and smiling mouth, frozen to death on the last evening of the old year. The New Year's sun rose upon a little pathetic figure. The child sat there, stiff and cold, holding the matches, of which one bundle was almost burned.
- She wanted to warm herself - the people said. No one imagined what beautiful things she had seen, and how happily she had gone with her old grandmother into the bright New Year.”

They walked for a long time, between the red Orphenatias and the gently greening birches, hoping for a new and better spring, until dusk dimmed the sun.